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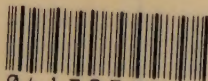
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A Novel

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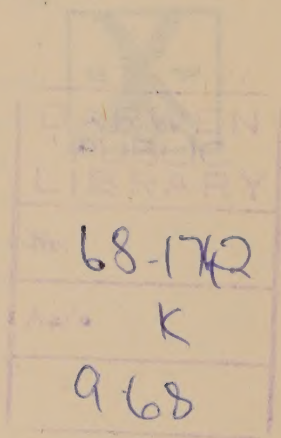
MARY BORDEN



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PART ONE
WILLIAM TWEEDLE BEGINS

CHAPTER I

IT is strange to find myself involved in the writing of a love story, for to tell the truth I have no great opinion of love. A mischief-making thing, truly. Looking back over the sixty odd years of my life, I observe my friends. What did this savage and heady emotion do to them? Did it make them wise? Was it an aid to truth, to lucidity, to courage? I cannot answer in the affirmative. Rather do I see the brave, the true and the fair-minded, under its influence turned into liars, become cowardly and deceitful, their very power of thinking forsaking them; it is a pitiful spectacle.

Not that I would dismiss lightly the case of Priscilla and Crab Willing. There was something remarkable between them, something so relentless as to reduce us all to nothingness. Call it a fatal attraction, a disastrous passion, anything you like, that doesn't disprove my thesis, on the contrary.

The fact is that Priscilla and Crab, and Simon too, were dignified honest people, and because of this thing called love they all behaved very badly and succeeded in doing themselves and everyone concerned an immense amount of harm.

I am out of patience with poets and songsters, amazed by the amount of sentimental rubbish that they heap before the shrine of that ridiculous boy Cupid and that libidinous old rascal the God Eros. Are we all at bottom romantic lunatics, ready to throw over the windmill for the sake of the most egotistical of all emotions, every decent habit of conduct, every scrap of kind understanding wisdom that we have laboriously acquired in the honourable workshop of life?

I am an old man and a snob, that is to say I like people who know how to behave and prefer any day a dull gentleman who doesn't tread on my toes to a raving enthusiast or a demented lover. The experiences of religion and love, we put on them the very highest value. Why? I don't know. Because I suppose to most of us it is a dreary business, this matter of living, of doing the little job that is given us to do. We don't like to be humdrum. Well they weren't, my three young people. Would to God they had been a little more so. One might have expected Crab at any rate to be content with the good Fortune had heaped upon him. One would have thought that his upbringing, his training in the army, his sense of his responsibilities, would have kept him steady. To look at him, smooth, arrogant, soft-voiced, cold, one would have laid heavy odds against his doing anything whatever that would in the least disturb the calm brilliance of his excessively pleasant and selfish habits. Yet because of Priscilla, just to get Priscilla for his own, crash, he smashed the whole edifice of his carefully constructed life to pieces.

He fell in love, as they say, and being a selfish brute and knowing what he wanted he was determined to get it, that is, to get her for his own. Still he would not, had he been sane, have done what he did to Priscilla whom he loved. And yet it was just because he loved her that he did her such a hurt, and it was the same with Simon. Between the two of them what chance had she? They loved her, they loved her! Bah! They tore her to pieces. And she in her turn, she whose character was built on loyalty, betrayed Simon, lied to him, broke his heart, all for love of Crab. A fine business, I must say.

And observe Simon. You will, alas, have ample opportunity for that; poor, quivering, nerve-wracked Simon, victim first of the awful joke, the world's joke, the alpha and omega of irony: I refer to man's belief that he can understand God; victim secondly of his passion for Priscilla, driven this way and that in frenzied bewilder-

ment, too pure of heart and too obsessed by the formula of Christian doctrine to understand what was the matter with him, getting into an awful muddle between his jealousy and his religious fervour, persecuting Priscilla. How can I not pity Simon, gentle and beautiful and slender, whose imagination had been wonderfully touched in childhood by that most pitiful of all human figures, the lonely Man on the Cross; Simon who loved Jesus of Nazareth and Priscilla, and could not reconcile the two in his heart and was transformed by jealousy into something more like a starving beast than a man of God? Imagine some young animal gone sick with hunger and prowling round a cabin, sniffing under the locked door the delectable odour of food and whimpering out in the night, there you would have the image of Simon Birch, rector of Creech St. Michael's and Lord of the Manor, heir through the death of his father and elder brother to the baronetcy and the property, and occupying himself the family living.

And so as I say, my task is distasteful to me, for I foresee that this story of Simon and Priscilla and Crab Willing will be dubbed a love story of the first order, and I, its sentimental author, will be branded with the mark that glows red on the pasty foreheads of all the callow youths and erotic old maids who have raved in print about affinities, sung songs to the moon or slopped about in the oozy slime of the sex problem.

I feel bound for this reason to protest at the outset. I write this book against my will. Priscilla was my god-child, but it is not for her sake that I do it. She was a gallant, manly girl, and needs no apology from me. I would, could I but follow the dictates of my conscience, leave Priscilla alone and pay to the child the tribute of silence, but my hand has been forced by that weak-minded silly woman, Milly Birch, the mother of Simon, and by Simon himself, who became for his own undoing and the confounding of three respectable families, Priscilla's husband.

Priscilla should never have married Simon. I take that as a foregone conclusion, and to inquire too closely into her reasons for doing it would seem to be both a waste of time and an impertinence were not Simon himself so tormented by the question as to make it important, while his relentless probing into the inner recesses of her shy, sturdy mind force me to follow him into that secret shrouded place which should have remained, as she wished it, inviolate.

I see my god-child surrounded, badgered, persecuted by a group of interfering busybodies under the guise of their militant religious belief. And the fact that they were honest, that Simon and Agatha at least were desperately in earnest, that they actually feared her soul would be damned to all eternity, makes the affair in my eyes no less painful. I see Priscilla with her head up and her back to the wall, keeping her mouth shut and dumbly suffering their interference. I see her standing there, her small square face going whiter than any young face ought ever to go, her eyes lowered as if, as she probably was, she were staring into a pit that yawned at her feet. I see her, at first humorous, then grave and troubled, then grim, determined, oh so determined, and at last I see her give way under that awful emotional pressure.

Of them all, I find Lady Agatha the most pitiful in this business. Priscilla was her own child. How could she have been so blind? It is all very puzzling. There they all were, Milly Birch and Simon and Agatha, living in a deep drowsy corner of England, one of the safest places one could have supposed, on the face of the earth, safe I mean for contentment and sanity, hemmed in by old familiar custom and prejudice, surrounded by people they had known all their lives, anchored in respect, embedded in kindly obligations, with their fine sedate houses sheltering them, their deep gardens lulling them to pleasant dreams, the rich gentle fields of England spreading round them, spacious yet not too spacious for contemplation, a

comfortable horizon bounding their vision : and they were played upon by wild emotions as if by some mischievous and mighty foreign wind. Is the safe refuge of England an illusion too, I wonder ? There are moments when I am haunted by some such fear. Yet how often in my wanderings in other countries have I not thought with a great welling gratitude of this secluded and tranquil spot to which I can return as to the deepest and most protected of all harbours ?

England, what is England ? What of its quality ? What of its speech ? Here in this corner, the fields are green, the cattle stand deep in lush pasture, the grey silvery tower of the church, of Simon's church, rises beautiful and serene above the roofs of the Elizabethan house where he lived, giving to the garden a deepness that is inexpressibly comfortable, and yet, and yet—I see England as a ship ploughing its way through the storms of history, engaged in an endless and relentless struggle with the sea—a cloud-besieged ship, a fog-bound ship, a ship buffeted by the howling wind and with the black cold night of the north closing endlessly in on her and never completely withdrawing from her course : a gallant tireless ship, but with twice as many passengers on board as she can safely carry. And I ask myself whether it is so very surprising, these things being considered, that in this comparatively sunless and overcrowded island where we are preoccupied by the business of fitting sixty million people into a space fit to hold a quarter the number, the weak should go to the wall and a man of imagination lose his reason ? At the back of our minds lurks the grim question of survival. The swarm is dense. Who will survive ? Who will go under or be pushed over the edge ? Nature is harsh with us and we are harsh with ourselves. Our ideal comes from Sparta. We admire above all men the lad who allows a wolf to tear out his vitals without wincing. It is dangerous in such a community to be too sensitive. The mass loathes anything of that sort. The eccentric man is rightly afraid. Heaven

help him if he show his secret feelings. The pack will be after him, hot on the scent of his peculiarity.

But to return to Agatha, that saintly Bohemian, that gentle lady of transparent guilelessness. She was a relic. She went back to the period of her grandmother, the devout Clarissa Farnborough, who was a friend of Newman's before he went over to Rome, and created some stir in her day as an Evangelist. I have heard in my boyhood old people talk of the strange thing it was to see the great lady in her stiff wine-coloured silk and black lace headdress holding gospel meetings in the town halls of Birmingham, Leeds and Liverpool and consorting openly with such Nonconformists as Robertson and Dale. It was she who taught poor Agatha in her forlorn childhood to believe in miracles and all manner of doctrines such as the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, that the Church has long since abandoned. Agatha stuck to them. She was not of an enquiring mind. Nothing came her way to disturb her picture of Adam and Eve and the Apple. For her it remained beautifully true that God had created the world in six days of a normal week and rested on Sunday. That divines could question these facts or doubt the Virgin Birth of Our Lord or the existence of a Hell of fire and brimstone was bewildering to her, but she never indulged in controversy. She was much too humble and read little save her Bible and her Prayer-book, and finding in them everything that she needed, remained to a great extent ignorant of the heresies breeding in the Church.

Ignorant, comic, sublime Agatha, never shall I forget her. She is for me as permanent a part of this country landscape as the mulberry tree by my garden gate. Six feet two she stood in her flat-heeled shoes, and she felt herself small and held herself of no account and huddled herself in her cape and drooped, bending like a long weed in the wind. And yet somehow, inexplicably, in spite of her outlandish shabbiness, her pitiful timidity and the almost idiotic radiance of her painfully long plain face, she

looked what she was, a lady of quality. She couldn't lose this look. Impossible to mistake her for a charwoman. Was it her height? Was it the length of her nose, or her neck? Was there some subtle beauty of harmony under that worn withered flesh? I don't know. All that I know is that there was a preposterous frumpiness about her, a gentle, weatherbeaten, dilapidated scarecrow quality that in the daughter of that old worldling the Duke of Dorset was most comically pleasant. No one ever wore out clothes as slowly as Agatha. Her squaretoed boots and her voluminous skirts and her meagre capes died painful lingering deaths. Their black turned to brown, they frayed, they sagged, they all but split in pieces. Occasionally Priscilla made a bonfire of some of these garments. Occasionally she bullied her mother into ordering a frock from a London dressmaker, but it was difficult even for Priscilla to make her mother understand the necessity of respectable clothing. Agatha would turn her long gentle face on Priscilla with a look of such humble contrition and of such complete bewilderment that one could only laugh. "But they were such good stout boots, Priscilla," she would murmur, looking at the heap of ashes behind the stable yard. "I had intended next year giving them to Bertha Shanks." Angelic Agatha, never was she allowed by any of the villagers to suspect that these gifts of hers were stuffed into ashbins or put away in the dark recesses of cupboards. She was too near-sighted to notice their absence from the feet of her neighbours and had too great a delicacy to inquire into their usefulness, and it was a significant tribute to the love they bore her that they accepted from her rheumatic swollen hands rubbish that they would have thrown back at anyone else. They knew that she would gladly have given them all her possessions had she had any. I have seen them in their cottage doorways, watching her outlandish figure go slopping down the the village street through the mud puddles, with that long, disjointed, clumsy yet sweeping stride of hers that had for

all its timidity and awkwardness such a grandeur of good breeding, and they would nod with smiles of respect and kindness. It would never have occurred to any one in the village to make fun of her, though her way of scattering tracts in her path as if she were an ostrich shedding feathers was a little trying to their patience. In the outlying villages where she was less well known people did laugh sometimes. She would stop her pony-cart at the sight of a tramp or a ploughman, would lean over the side beckoning, and with her sallow, flaccid, chinless face breaking into a heavenly smile would say, "My friend, here is a beautiful message for you from Jesus Christ your Saviour." But I remember one night at the sign of the Lion, one of the recipients of her Christian favours, a stranger, a travelling pedlar of crockery and knickknacks, ventured to make sport of the episode, and being sharply admonished by my old friend Bowles, the publican, and replying in a somewhat obstinate and ungodly manner, a fracas ensued during which a couple of glasses and the pedlar's head were broken.

Certainly the villagers and farmers had a very fair sense of that family's value, and derived an unconscious enjoyment, even a slow savour of excitement perhaps, from its double allegiance to Lady Agatha and her husband the Colonel, who hunted hounds.

A more incongruous couple in this world of mismated people I have never met. One would have thought, watching the life they separately lived in their big, barracky, cheerless house with its model stables and rough neglected park, that they had not a taste in common. Colonel Brampton had an immense respect for horses and hounds, for farmers and foxes, and none at all for parsons, although he believed, in the usual English county way, in the Church and the Tory Party as the defenders of the present system, which was, as he used pompously to say on political platforms, "good enough for him." For the rest he liked a bottle of port with a rich bouquet, and a pretty woman with a touch of the daredevil about her. He had been

something of a rip in his youth, and a frequent visitor at Blickington, where I too was a frequent guest, and the story goes that his marriage was arranged one evening after dinner when both he and the Duke were slightly muddled with wine. I can imagine the scene, the few muttered words, and the Duchess, who was a master at slinging a net over young men and who had rehearsed her spouse, waiting in the drawing-room with her four plain daughters round her. The Duke had no doubt been carefully coached. "No looks, no money, but a good girl," the Duchess had made him understand. "A really good girl, in fact with the character of an angel." But how the Duke put forward the matter no one will ever know. Anyhow the thing was done, and turned out not so badly after all, perhaps because no man or woman could live with Agatha and not be touched in the end by her childlike innocence, her almost ridiculous ignorance of evil, her sublime unselfishness. Indeed I suspect Reggie Brampton of concealing under his ribald hearty materialism an immense respect for his wife.

And as I say, they were not unhappy together. Though Reggie did bolt whenever she brought a parson into the house, though Agatha's thin, loose cheeks did shake with emotion when he took the name of God in vain, and losing his temper swore vigorously at the stable boys, though he did enjoy the intimate favours of women more of his own kind, yet somehow in spite of it all they achieved a life that had a dignity, for Agatha, although she was in mortal terror of his spending the next life in Hell, was either too great a lady to make scenes about his carryings on in this one, or too innocent to be jealous, and ignored either truly or apparently his infidelities. And if they had no interests in common they at any rate agreed on a wide range of things that they did not care about. They met as it were and suited each other in respect of all that they did without, and this included simply all the usual comforts and refinements of civilized life. They were both Spartans. Luxury meant nothing to them. Not a chintz curtain or

cover had been renewed in that draughty house for twenty years. They did not notice the quality of the food they ate, or the ugliness of the rooms they lived in, and were serenely unconscious of the icy temperature of the big plastered hall full of stuffed birds and fish and foxes' heads, and the trophies of the Colonel's shooting expeditions in Africa. Not a rug graced the chill black and white marble slabs of the floor. On a winter's day the fire would remain unlighted, and the Colonel, his red face glowing like a beacon, would come stamping in, his moustache and eyebrows sparkling with frost, and would stand cheerfully rubbing his hands in front of the empty grate.

Priscilla has told me that her mother suffered constantly from chilblains and rheumatism, that she took a cold bath every morning, not at all because she liked it, but because she hated it. She would really have enjoyed more than almost anyone a soft bed and had a craving for chocolates, which she had once to her own deep shame, and with disastrous results to her stomach, gratified to excess, devouring half a pound of sweets all in a few moments, and confessing to Priscilla afterwards, with tears in her eyes, in bed with indigestion, that she had given in to a terrible, an overwhelming temptation. Poor Agatha, if she liked sweets and other good things to eat she never to my knowledge except on that one occasion indulged her appetite, and eat so sparingly of her habitual cold mutton and boiled potatoes that her big bones were not even decently covered. As for Priscilla, she was a pagan and rather a glutton. She did not in the least take after her mother. She was her father's companion and was brought up like a boy. He taught her to ride, to shoot, to cast a fly and to play every kind of outdoor game, and she adored him of course ; but she was not really like him, for she had a mind and noticed things, and in her loyal heart was sorry for her mother, who wanted everyone to understand the mysterious beauty of the love of Jesus Christ. It was this understanding, this sense of contrast, of a fundamental contradiction

in her home, beginning as it did in a feeling of self-reproach because she and her father seemed to leave her mother out of everything, that was to be her undoing. And yet had Reggie lived I am sure that Priscilla would not have married Simon, nor would Agatha have let herself go, in her mysticism, to such dangerous extremes during her husband's lifetime: for she had a wholesome fear of him and was obliged while he was there to restrain her ardent interest in the unseen things of the spirit and pay at least a small measure of attention to the practical business of life. It was his death, occurring unfortunately at the end of Priscilla's first season in London, that seems to have thrown Agatha off the rails, for he died in his stable yard, surrounded by grooms, cursing the horse that had thrown him against the stone wall of the stable and trampled on his chest. Agatha, hurrying out of the house, like some great shabby flapping crow, reached him in time to hear that final oath, to see the defiant eyes glaze over, to call helplessly to those deaf ears and to kneel there in an anguish in the yard, the grooms and stable boys standing round, an everlasting horror, an endless unanswerable question, lodged in her shrunken breast. He had died an unbeliever, and at the moment of that realisation a tiny wheel, some little vital spring in her mind, became I believe unhinged.

So that I ought not to blame Agatha perhaps so much for what happened and for what she allowed Simon and Milly Birch to do to Priscilla. It was inevitable I suppose. Agatha at least left Priscilla alone once she had married her to Simon and didn't fuss or fret any longer about the poor child's immortal soul. And of course she had no inkling of how Simon went on, harping interminably on the fiddle strings of his beliefs, forcing Priscilla to keep step to his high exalted tune. What a comedy. Would that it had ended in one. I shudder under my crusty old skin at the indecency of it all.

All the same, if there is to be any value in this story it must reside in its truth, and I am obliged to be honest and

to hold Priscilla responsible, by her final act of defiance, for destroying the happiness of a dozen people, and for dragging at least one man from the anchorage of his belief and his sanity. And again, out of this arises the question, can a woman do this sort of thing and yet not do herself a lasting injury? That question I leave for the moment unanswered. It may be that Simon's honest and painful endeavour to arrive at the truth of it all will answer it for us, for Simon, believing fiercely in both God and Priscilla, brought them face to face, and surely the light of God's countenance turned full upon Priscilla through Simon's agency must show her to us, stark stripped of all romantic disguise.

YOU begin perhaps to understand why I am loath to write this book. It is a dangerous business, writing a story in which God, even such a God as Simon's, plays as vital a part as any of the human characters.

But as I have already said, my hand has been forced by Simon himself and his mother. He sent off his MSS. to the publishers without saying a word to anyone. By the merest chance he chose Hannigans, who are a respectable firm and with whom I have had dealings for years. They, very luckily, mentioned to me that they had received a strange document which, though it became quite incoherent toward the end, was possessed in their opinion of a definite value. They asked me if I would be good enough to read it and give them my opinion. I agreed. They gave it to me. It was Simon's Confession.

I went straight to Milly, telling her of my discovery and informing her that I would of course take up the matter with Hannigans and inform them that publication was out of the question. To my amazement she denied my right to interfere with Simon's wishes. She is determined at whatever personal cost to herself that these writings of his should see the light. I have reasoned, I have argued, I have objected until I am weary, and I have made no impression on that small obstinate mind, which is entirely

absorbed by her adoration for her son. She believes literally that it is the Will of God that Simon's Journal be published in book form, and she believes too that the book will not only justify but immortalise her son. She cannot see that these outpourings of his tortured spirit are an unpardonable self-revelation, or that if they attract the attention of thinking people at all, they are bound to raise questions which she in her simplicity thinks have been answered for all time in the Bible. The indiscretions of prim middle class women under the influence of an overwhelming passion are indeed amazing. Once these females break out there is no telling what they will do. Had little Lady Birch fallen in love in her old age with the village butcher she could in my opinion have behaved in a no more unseemly manner.

It is possible that I might feel more pity for her did I not feel so much for the others. She was the smallest of them all. She had really no business in that gallery of proud, well-bred people, for whatever her virtues she simply cannot be allowed to pass as a gentlewoman. She was and is and always will be the daughter of a shopkeeper, and of his respectable widow who kept a lodging-house for students in Oxford. Edward Birch found her there and married her for her pretty face. It is pretty still. Indeed at sixty she looks very much as she did when he brought her to Creech from that narrow, stuffy house in the University town, where she demurely darned stockings of an evening before the parlour fire. Edward was my friend. We were boys together. He was a scholar and had a childlike nature and lived buried in his garden and his books. I doubt whether he ever realised his wife's limitations. If he did he gave no sign. His manner to her was always perfect. It had an old-fashioned courtesy that was touching. She was small and frail and in that provoking way delicate little women have, bore him with unruffled sweetness and unimpaired health two handsome sons, and saw him calmly, resignedly, into his grave.

Simon was the second of these sons, and was always his mother's favourite. As a boy he was a perfect specimen of a mother's darling, and as a man he was constantly reminded of the fact by his mother, who never failed to tell visitors how sweet he had used to look at the age of six in sailor suits and curls. My first spark of sympathy for Simon was lighted by the painful flush which I saw spread over his slender cheeks on one of these occasions. He had come down from Oxford for the Christmas holidays and was passing a plate of cakes at tea in the drawing-room, when the words "striped blue and white sailor suits, golden curls," slung like sugary fruit on a tinselled cadence hit him in the ear with a sharp, nipping smack. The cakes slid sideways, his beautiful face went crimson, but his eyes as they travelled past me an instant later to rest on his mother were as kind as they were mortified. They implored but did not reproach. It was a pity she did not understand even the expression of those eyes, which held for her all the light of the world, but of course she never understood anything.

They were a curious pair. I have often wondered about their relationship and have asked myself whether his regard for her and his intimacy with her was a sign of weakness or of strength in Simon. It was difficult in those days to tell whether he liked or hated all that fussing and petting. I imagine that it exasperated him as a young man, but that he endured it in order not to hurt her, and gradually as he grew older and softer came to depend upon it. I remember Priscilla's amusement when she first married him over her mother-in-law's jealousy regarding Simon's hot water bottle, Simon's socks, Simon's slippers, Simon's buttons. "She thought I might want to sew them on, you know, but I explained that I didn't know how, so all is well." There you have Priscilla in all her ignorant optimism. The daughter of an ungodly M.F.H. who had been her idol and her dear companion and had died leaving her eight hunters and a couple of hacks, she had suddenly after

one brilliant season in London with Violet Moone come home and married a parson who was a saint, Priscilla who all her life had driven her devout mamma nearly distracted by her inability to find the places in her Prayer Book ; and she thought that all would be well because she let her mother-in-law do the housekeeping.

The Birches and the Bramptons lived within easy driving distance of each other on opposite sides of Jericho Sands.

As everyone knows, Jericho Sands (the name dates from the Crusades) is one of the biggest places in England, and Crab Willing was heir to it, being Tupper's only son.

I turn to Tupper with relief. Humbly I give thanks for Tupper, fifteenth Marquis of Moone, and one of the greatest gentlemen, as he was one of the shyest of human beings, in these islands. Never have I known a man as shy as Tupper. His shyness was such as to infect his entire family and every guest that came into his formal house. It was so palpable that you could almost put out your hand and touch it. It seemed to have a colour and a smell. It seemed to float through the vast high rooms of his house like a mist. I think of it as volatile and grey, and as coming from him in whiffs like the faintly acrid smoke of a bonfire of burning leaves. It surrounded him and shrouded him (indeed if ever a man was almost invisible he was) and muffled his words and subdued his every movement. Actually, for the most part, it reduced him to complete silence, and kept him in company from moving either his arms or legs. In a crowded London drawing-room, for instance, he invariably remained planted all the evening on the exact spot where his wife left him, a habit that gained for him the reputation of being inordinately full of his own importance. Poor Tupper, he was certainly not thinking of himself with any sense of gratification at these moments. It may be doubted indeed whether he was thinking at all. The music, the laughter, the voices, the faces, reduced him to a dazed state of semi-consciousness that was the result of his effort to control his panic. Behind

his high mild blank countenance such a struggle was going on between his longing to bolt and his determination to do his duty and stick it out, that he simply did not hear what people said to him and was quite unaware of being rude when he did not answer.

He was very tall and red. His hair and his spiky eyebrows and his moustache were of a pale sandy shade, his face brick colour, and when he began to grow grey he was all of a pepper and salt mixture like the clothes he wore in the country. The shape of his face reminded one of a walrus. The edge of his upper teeth showed under his drooping moustache that flowed back and away in two long tawny plumes on either side of a chin that for some hundred years had been in process of disappearing. This gave him at times a fierce and at other times an almost idiotic appearance. He had no voice, that is to say his voice had no tone, and his words when he spoke made no sound. People who did not know him well enough to have their ears tuned to that dry toneless murmur simply never understood what he said.

He looked exactly like his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather. All the Moones looked alike. The row of their portraits in the long gallery at Jericho Sands was a curiously monotonous repetition of the same high, bland, noble walrus, and this in spite of the fact that they had almost all of them married beautiful wives and produced lovely daughters of the most varied types. Violet, Tupper's wife, was no exception to this rule. If he chose her for her looks, as an ornament to his house, he showed his sense in the choice. She was of the type that can carry a cartload of jewels, that looks handsome in the most hideous tiara, that fits in to the most sumptuous and ornate architectural scheme, and she had a ravishing smile. The curve of her teeth in her jaw, glimpsed when she laughed, was a bit of workmanship worthy of the most skilled jeweller in Europe. Not that she laughed a great deal at Jericho Sands, she didn't, but

then she never stayed there long. Jericho Sands bored her, Tupper bored her, her children, or at any rate the girls, bored her, and why should her ladyship be bored? "Tupper," she would say after a week or two, "if I stay here much longer I shall get exactly like you," and off she would go. The town house was always open. She was for a number of years Mistress of the Robes. I imagine that Court life did not much appeal to her, but her appointment gave her a decent excuse for being in town, and she had a high sense of the fitness of things. She filled her public rôle with perfect propriety and decorum, came down to us at a moment's notice for any boring official function, opened bazaars, appeared on political platforms, was president of every local philanthropic society, and serenely, without grumbling, and with consummate tact, making every little humble body of people feel that their affairs, which interested her no more than the buzzings of flies, were the most absorbing, important affairs in the world, went through with her duties. For the rest she liked crowds and variety and had a taste for dipping into the life of foreign capitals. She would come down to Jericho Sands for Christmas, hunt for a month and be off again to Rome, to Paris, to Berlin. Her continental trail was registered on Tupper's table by a series of telegrams giving a series of addresses. As for him, he never of course by word or sign expressed any concern over these wanderings or any desire for more of her society than she was pleased to give him of her own accord. He would say—"Violet seems to be enjoying herself in Vienna," or "Vi has wired from Madrid, says the weather is bad," or "Vi is back in town, wants me to run up for a day." That was all. He himself had after a period of carefully concealed agony in attendance at Court withdrawn into the solitude of his great mansion, his wide rolling park, and his garden that was his one passion.

No one was ever in this life as quiet, as monosyllabic, as slow as Tupper, but his slowness wasn't exactly stupidity, it was due to a conscientious, scrupulous desire to do the

right and the just thing. He had a humble sense of his responsibilities to people dependent on him. His conscience did not work as other men's, that is to say it didn't occupy itself with the usual things. All the commonly considered important things he took in his stride and dealt with without apparently noticing what he was doing, such things as his daughters' marriages, the fixing of their dowries, the appointment of a Bishop, over which he was of course consulted, the raising of a battalion of territorials, the selection of the local Conservative candidate, over such matters Tupper never hesitated, and if his decisions were criticised remained blandly obstinate ; but if it was a case of sacking a groom or a gardener, or of pensioning off some old woman who had helped in the laundry, or if the local council came to ask his opinion about putting electricity into the school, or about cutting a road through some farm, or if they wanted his support in demanding a railway station or a post office for some minute nearby village, then Tupper was troubled in his silent mind for days and took endless pains to arrive at a just decision. And yet he never consulted anyone, scarcely talked of his problems and worries even to me, but seemed to go on the principle that he himself was his own highest authority and that in the hidden recesses of his own being he must seek for and find the correct answer to any and every question.

And it was true. He was and he did.

There was something pathetic about him. He did not know what it was to amuse himself. Indeed I do not believe it ever occurred to him that life could provide him with amusement. The ordinary pastimes of his peers filled him with a bewildered contempt. Foxhunting and racing bored him. Politics he despised, and his shyness cut him off from the pleasures of human intercourse. He was shy with his servants, with his relatives, even with Agatha, who was his cousin, shy with his children and shy with his beautiful, restless wife who drifted in and out of his house like a radiant cloud.

Such a man's son was, one would have supposed, destined to be his companion, his friend, his confidant. But there again the system stepped in, taking the boy off first to school, then into the Army, to India and South Africa. It may be said that this father and son were barely acquainted when Crab at forty came home after the war.

His one absorbing interest was gardening. With flowers he was not shy, though shy of showing his love for them. Shamefacedly he would slink out, half a dozen times a day, to his glasshouses, and stand rapt in a timid, tender ecstasy above some fragile and lovely bloom. He was really a remarkable gardener and took a childish pride in his successes at flower shows. The fame that his orchids and lilies brought him at Chelsea or Vincent Square was a source to him of the deepest satisfaction. The only congenial cronies that he had were other impassioned gardeners like himself. Mr. Betterton, for instance, of Cary, and good, fat Lady Jennings. They would meet together these three in town and confab at great length and exchange letters and cuttings from rose-bushes. With these affinities he was almost loquacious, to other acquaintances he seldom found anything to say. In our long walks together, if he talked at all, and we would often tramp through the park for three hours without exchanging a word, he would speak of the Tory party being in a bad way, would mildly abuse Lloyd George for wanting his land, discuss the cost of putting new bathrooms into the house, or would refer to the possibility of war with Germany and his own failure to hit it off with Kaiser Wilhelm. His view of the doings of other people from his place of detachment was somewhat unusual, but he seldom expressed any interest in them. For the most part, if I related a bit of scandal or gossip, his attitude was summed up in a look of mild contempt that meant "What a fuss about nothing." But I remember at the port stage of a certain Christmas dinner at Jericho Sands, when twenty or more of us were gathered together round his table, his suddenly coming

out of his semi-comatose state with a phrase that tickled and startled me, issuing as it did from his dry lips softly like a rustling leaf. They had been talking of Julia Brown, a cousin of his, whose husband was divorcing her, having caught her *en flagrant délit* with somebody or other, I've forgotten the man's name. They were all jovially taking sides and arguing about the divorce laws, when Tupper said quietly but with a distinctly marked sneer on his face that had suddenly become the very emblazoned sign of haughty disgust—"Adultery—why shouldn't she commit adultery if she wants to?"

Wonderful Tupper, little did he dream at that moment that poor Simon would one day rush into that very dining-room and set the solid walls of his house rocking. Little did he imagine that his philosophy, the statement of faith in his class contained in those words of his, was to be put to the supreme test at a no very distant date, for what lay behind his remark was simply a statement of belief in his own kind, and had he not been of that kind he would have put it in some such words as these:

"We through the past five hundred years or more have served England sufficiently well to have the right now to do as we like and to despise the conventions and restrictions necessary to regulate the lives of small people."

But to go back to my story, or rather to explaining why I am writing it. As a last resort and because of my affection for all these people, I have undertaken to arrange Simon's papers, and have persuaded Milly Birch to let me edit them and incorporate them in a book that will, so I have promised, set them off to advantage. This is not as big a lie as it sounds, for I do truly want to deal kindly with Simon, and if his secrets must be divulged would clothe them with some sort of decent covering, and the only way to do this would seem to be by placing him before the reader as truly and carefully as I can, in the frame of his own home, in that lovely austere yet mellow manor with its deep garden to the south, with the emerald lawns spread

like a carpet between the north door and the silvery towered church. But it is going to be a long and a tedious business, for in order to make clear the quality of their drama I must explain my characters, who were none of them, not even Milly Birch, insignificant, and perhaps by the time I have finished Milly will have thought better of the whole business. I shall draw the thing out, then put it away in my desk. It would be a pity, even though I disguise to some extent my dozen characters and place them in a county that shall for propriety remain without a name, for this book to appear until most of those who are concerned in it are dead.

CHAPTER II

OF one thing I am, curiously enough, convinced, namely, that if Priscilla and Crab had met during the year or two that preceded Reggie's death this story would never have been written. But they did not meet; indeed, they saw nothing of each other after Priscilla entered her teens. Crab didn't come down to Jericho Sands at all during the winter of 1912. He may have been soldiering abroad, I forget, or it may have been simply that he was too busy amusing himself elsewhere. He seemed to find little enough to amuse him at any time in our part of the world. A poor hunting country, too hilly, too wooded, too many coal mines in the offing, not half good enough for his lordship, who preferred the Quorn or the Cottesmore and had his own hunting box at Melton. As for the pheasants, he didn't mind bringing his friends down once in a while to shoot Tupper's birds, there were plenty of them, but so there were in a hundred other places. He was a good gun and booked up weeks ahead. It was difficult to fit everything in. One was expected in certain houses. One got in the habit of going. One didn't like to let people down.

And in the spring of that summer, the summer of Priscilla's season in London, he went off to Alaska and Greenland to hunt grizzly, polar bear and walrus. He had some very good sport, so Tupper informed me, but I suspect him of planning the trip for that particular season with one eye to being as far away as possible from London when his sisters were being presented and taken to balls. He would have hated taking the girls to balls. His sisters bored him. And so he did not meet Priscilla.

It was a pity. I who saw them meet some years later know that had they met then it would have been the same

with them. Their recognition, each of the other, was curiously downright, unfaltering, instantaneous. They would have responded to each other at once as they had done then. It would all have been perfectly simple and straightforward.

It is difficult for me to speak of Priscilla. I approach her timidly, with the old lasting ache in my heart throbbing again under the pressure of my obligation. Simon's journal lies open before me. It is full of her. There is scarce a page where her name does not appear. It is a lament to Priscilla, an arraignment of Priscilla, a minute, searching, uncannily clairvoyant analysis of Priscilla's heart. The record of a jealous and subtle mind: it turns on her the searchlight of his inflamed passion and shows her there, exposed and mute, for all the world to stare at. Priscilla and God, he sets the two over against each other.

Priscilla on trial, in Simon's journal, says no word in self-defence. Nor do I set out to defend her conduct. She was what she was.

What words shall I choose in speaking of her? I who am a writer of dull, unpopular books that are read by a few stuffy old men like myself, when they wish to induce sleep, have a wholesome respect for words and am well acquainted with the tricks they play on us. 'Tis a wonderful way they have of conveying a meaning the exact opposite of that which we intend. I must be very careful in regard to Priscilla, very precise.

It occurs to me that every statement is in some measure a lie and that each time I open my mouth to speak I create at least one, perhaps many, false impressions, for a word has many existences. It is an aged bawd that has been bandied about on a thousand slovenly tongues. Its echoes are myriad, its connections unmentionable, its ultimate significance nil. It means one thing to you, another to me, a third to the man who is eavesdropping. If I speak to a hundred people I am creating a hundred fictions. Then why speak at all, you say? Why indeed?

For if I cannot speak of Priscilla in exact words that will convey the definite quality of her character then I deserve to be thrown out on the rubbish heap with the contents of my own waste basket. Priscilla herself cannot help us, for she did not know how to talk.

Suppose that an Esquimo and a Fiji Islander came to consult me about passing the winter in Scotland, and asked is it cold there? To the Esquimo I say, no, it is warm, and the Fiji Islander takes my word for it and rushes off to that country and dies of pneumonia. Or suppose that I have a secret doubt of myself, that there is some questionable hidden thing that festers in my memory, that I am ashamed of, and I confess it in order to get rid of it. I try to explain in the market place. "Friends," I call out. "Listen, I once did so and so, is it a little thing or enormous?" And some laugh at me and say, "It was nothing," and others jeer at me for a fool, but others again take it seriously and clap me in prison or a madhouse, and none of them are right, none of them understand.

So it was with Priscilla, who did not know how to express herself, and who hated explanations. How could she answer Simon's questions? How could she explain to him why she had married him, and if he couldn't see for himself what her feeling for him was, how could she tell him in words? He wanted words. He had an immense respect for words. Words were important to him. Without them he could understand nothing. And Priscilla was dumb and when she was driven to it said things that meant nothing.

Why, he asks again and again, did she marry him?

Once long afterwards she tried to explain to me. Simon had asked her so many times. She had given him so many desperate, clumsy answers, that even for her the question had come to have an immense importance, and I gathered that this time, to me, she was determined to get at the truth of the matter.

"I married Simon because he was good, because I was

fond of him and because I wanted to make mummy happy. Mummy was awfully worried about me after that season in London." She then added after a pause, her brows drawn in an effort to puzzle it out, "I thought it was the thing to do, although I didn't want to do it. I think I did it partly because I didn't want to, if you know what I mean. And he was good, he was. Yes, that was it, I was fond of him, and I married him to be safe."

"Safe from what, Priscilla?"

"From going to the bad."

Good heavens, what a phrase! I can hear it now issuing from her firm, sad, smiling lips. It was thus that she did her best, with grotesque hacks trotted out from bad novels, even in talking to me, to create a ridiculous, unseemly caricature of herself.

It is no wonder that Simon, who insisted upon being told in so many words, was miserably misled. No wonder that he kept going back to that year before Reggie's death and to Priscilla's season in London under Violet Moone's brilliant wing and tried to discover there some secret dreadful thing that had happened to Priscilla. Something had happened in town to make Priscilla unhappy. She admitted as much, and she had married him partly because she was unhappy: she admitted that too, under his cross-questioning. But as to what exactly it was that had happened, she refused to tell him. She refused to tell anyone. All that I know about it, and that isn't much, I have learned from Violet and from that girl friend of Priscilla's, Puss Featherstone, but I didn't have to be told that it was a pitifully small, ridiculously innocent sort of deadly sin that she had committed. Anyone who knew Priscilla and had a grain of common sense would know that, and if I dwell upon it here it is because there seems to be a value in making clear the very high opinion that Priscilla had of herself, and of explaining that it was just because of this that she could on such a fine point turn on herself with disgust and disdain. The pride of a high-spirited girl

implies a fastidiousness that is beyond the comprehension of most men, and Priscilla's pride beat anything that I have ever come across of the same name. It landed her in an impasse, for she dealt with herself harshly and yet did not feel that she was called upon to explain why to anyone.

I was abroad a good deal during the year before Priscilla's marriage. Her note announcing it reached me in Athens. I have it by me, and as I look at the large, boyish scrawl I see Priscilla again as she was at nineteen, a manly, up-standing, gravely humorous girl with a boy's grace of limb. Simon chose to think of her as a little thing. He speaks of her in his journal as—"Priscilla, my wife, so little and so obstinate," and says, "She looked like a Greek boy, a golden boy. There is a description of David in the Book of Kings that always reminds me of her. I can see Priscilla running, letting fly a stone from a sling and killing Goliath, a giant."

There is something of her quality in Simon's picture, something gallant and daring, something royal and free and glad. He saw it, but he was wrong about her being small. That was merely what he wanted to think her. I have heard people argue with heat concerning her beauty. Some said she was beautiful, others said no, she was plain. All, however, were arrested by her face. There was a curious, almost hurting charm of contradiction in it. Her jaw was square, her eyes, very wide apart, were shadowed, her nose turned up, her mouth had a comical, sweet curve. An open, sturdy countenance, firmly sculptured, with funny, childlike curves interrupting its pure, stern meaning. The structure of her head, carried high on broad shoulders, and the harmony of her limbs, showed her breeding. She was very fair, very pale. Her skin was white as porcelain with bluish shadows under her eyes, like blue smudges.

There was a look of honesty and of pride and of extreme youthful gravity about her. She impressed people as

courageous, as very strong and yet exhausted, as very young and yet very wise. Perhaps it was the contrast of her strong body and her pallor, at moments ghastly, that gripped people, that gave her a peculiar, an almost painful charm. Obviously nature and her forbears had intended her to be a magnificent woman, but something had failed the manufacturers; they had run out of some ingredient in the making of her. Her structure was perfect, her straight, flat back, her deep chest, her fine legs and narrow hips were all beautifully made and knit together, but there wasn't enough flesh and blood about her to make one feel she was safe. One had, as one watched her moving in her vigorous, gallant way, a catch at one's heart; she was made of such beautiful strong bone and yet was somehow so frail; a very young and haggard goddess, moving swiftly through wide open spaces, alert, keen, sure, confident, gravely glorying in her young immortality, yet about to drop suddenly, taken unawares, exhausted.

Her voice was perhaps the most charming thing about her. Men and women and children were arrested by it as by some weird deep note of commanding music. Not that she talked much. As I have said, she was no talker. She only spoke when she had something to say, and that was seldom. She had a lazy mind. Thinking about things bored her, and she had come to the conclusion very early in life that it did no good. The situation at home between Reggie and Agatha, the double loyalty she felt for her father and mother, had accentuated her reticence, helping to make her dumb. She had discovered when she was still a child that the only way in which to be true and loyal, and indeed even decent, was never to ask questions, never allude to anything concerning them, never show any surprise, any distress, any wistfulness, to take completely for granted, to assume by an obstinate and tranquil silence that all was well with the two human beings she loved.

She stood there between them, her mother's gentle prayers sounding in one ear, her father's jovial blasphemy

ringing in the other, and stood fast by both, her young arms outstretched, shielding them from each other and from mischievous curiosity. By nature and temperament she was her father's companion. They liked the same things, everything that is that had to do with sport, especially hunting, with occasional larks in town that consisted in dinners in restaurants and going to the play thrown in as contrast. They dined out a great deal in the county when Priscilla let down her skirts, went together to Newmarket, Goodwood and Ascot, and were to be seen every now and then on a Channel steamer, bound for a Paris week-end, and Reggie quite naturally ceased to look to other ladies for companionship once Priscilla was old enough to go about with him. He had decided that she was old enough at sixteen. Her education as a result went to the dogs, but neither he nor she bothered at all about that, and Agatha seems not to have attached much importance to it.

Agatha had long ago dropped out of the county's social life. She had no intimates of her own class. Reggie's hunting friends were to her no more than flying streaks of shadow. She could never remember their names. When she met them in the park, or when they trooped into the house, she would greet them vaguely with a gentle bewildered smile and would fade out of sight on some one of her innumerable errands. Her friends were the derelicts of the countryside. Her visitors came to the kitchen door holding their battered caps in their hands, or clasping their ailing babies under dingy shawls. Few were presentable, few were able-bodied, all were down and out for one reason or another. Scarce any were respectable according to village standards. Priscilla knew that most of them exploited her mother's pity and made hypocritical appeals to her infinite generosity. Often she would find Agatha, her long, tender face quivering, her gentle eyes filling with tears, showing some ruffian out of the garden door.

"What is it, Mother?"

"He has been drinking again, he has broken the pledge."

"But did you expect he wouldn't?"

"Certainly, darling. He promised, and now his wife is expecting another baby. That is the tenth, Priscilla. Eight have died, and he confessed that he knocked her about yesterday."

"He came to confess?"

"Yes, that is, yes, I think so. They can't pay their rent, you see."

"Oh Mummy, Mummy!"

"But he does want to be better, Priscilla. He has promised to come to church next Sunday. I can't not help him."

"No, dear, I suppose not."

"To-morrow I must call there. She has nothing for the baby. Is there anything in the house, do you think?"

"There are some bits of flannel, those old petticoats."

"That will do nicely. To-morrow is such a full day, Priscilla. Do you think you could drive me in the pony-cart? It's a Thursday, isn't it? You don't hunt on Thursday, do you?"

"Of course I will, darling."

And on every non-hunting day Priscilla would drive Agatha from farm to farm, from cottage to cottage, along the pleasant country lanes, and would pull up without comment at Agatha's fluttering signal when a tramp or a cowman or a shepherd hove into sight, and would sit patiently with her back turned and her eyes fixed on the distant fields while Agatha gave away her little sacred books that came monthly from the British and Foreign Bible Society, or she would wait in the road outside cottages where children had whooping cough, or call at the gate of the Village Institute to bring Agatha home from her prayer meeting, and if Agatha lingered too long, as she usually did, she would stalk to the door, open it, and wave her hand, then go back to her post. She did her best to look after her mother. She would make her wrap up in wintry weather, and would send her upstairs to change her boots

when they got home with an abrupt, "Now, darling, up you go, your feet are sopping." It would have taken a penetrating eye to perceive how strongly she disapproved of Agatha's way of life, for she spoke no word of reproach, nor ever tried to dissuade her mother from endeavouring to turn the thoughts of her neighbours' grooms and gardeners and housemaids to Jesus. Agatha herself did not know how Priscilla loathed to see her slopping about in the wet, tired, muddy and bedraggled, or how she waited and watched ready to pounce in a fury on anyone who dared rebuff her mother. She hadn't a suspicion of how Priscilla boiled inside at the touching, ludicrous sight of her holding an umbrella over that lousy, drunken, immoral Sally Winch, outside the Green Lion. She was merely a little afraid of Priscilla, and bewildered by the girl, who would accompany her in her way of life so far and no farther, to the door, that is, of the church, to the threshold of the still, holy place that was so beautiful to Agatha. And she did not know that Priscilla stood between her and Reggie, shielding her from her husband's gaze. She had no idea of how Priscilla manoeuvred to keep from Reggie's knowledge the long history of her mother's disappointments, of her innumerable misplaced charities. She was not aware of the necessity of hiding from Reggie the immense volume of her fruitless endeavours, or her increasing intimacy with the Chapel people, or the number of loaves of bread and sacks of coal that found their way out of the kitchen yard. Reggie would have come down on the lazy spongers like a cartload of bricks had he known about them. It is quite possible that he would have taken that awful Beckitt, the pimple-faced Wesleyan Minister, by the collar had he caught him on his knees in Agatha's sitting-room, and had he realised the extent of his wife's ragged clientele he would probably have had a stroke ; but Agatha did not understand this ; it didn't occur to her that Priscilla ever fibbed on her behalf, or told Spindle the butler to show ecstatic Methodist parsons into the morning room through

the small, unused south door. If numerous peculiar visitors of Agatha's were smuggled into that house up the back stairs, it was certainly not Agatha's doing. Agatha would never have thought out such a scheme. She was afraid of Reggie, but not as much so as she would have been had she been more shrewd. It didn't really occur to her that she was a victim of widespread and clever duplicity, or that she outraged her husband's sense of decency by going to Chapel prayer meetings and hobnobbing with Socialists. She did not even know that she was queer. She only knew that she was unattractive and dull and not welcome in his world, and she found it perfectly natural that Reggie and Priscilla should prefer each other's society to her own, and that they should be popular with people who never looked at her. Though she and Violet Moone didn't get on she never criticised Violet, never complained of Reggie's dining often in the old days at Jericho Sands without her, used to urge him to go, and seemed in a way pleased that her relations at the great house should like her husband so much though they cared for her so little. She did not expect people to care for her. Long ago she had ceased to look for understanding from anyone but her Maker, and she was, I believe, singularly unaware of how much Priscilla loved her. She missed the point of Priscilla's attitude towards herself. It never dawned on her that Priscilla's conduct involved sacrifice, or that she put the girl's sense of humour to the most excruciating strain. She didn't see, because she was so angelically guileless, the loyalty of Priscilla and Reggie. She only felt painfully their disapproval and tried as best she could to efface herself, to live her life with as little fuss as possible, leaving them alone together more and more as time went on. And they did no doubt enjoy themselves immensely without her. They were, this father and daughter, marvellous friends, but they never admitted to each other that they were happiest when she was not there. She would leave them in the stables, of a Sunday morning, while she stalked in her

flapping black cape across the fields to church. And if Priscilla looked wistfully after that ungainly figure, Agatha did not see the look, or understand how those two would have welcomed her staying there with them in the nice smelling straw, with their beautiful dumb animals, and Priscilla and Reggie would say no word to each other of the pity of it, though sometimes with the church bells pealing out through the sunshine they would be troubled and a little ashamed.

It was in this way that reserve became one of Priscilla's essential characteristics. Her feeling about her parents spread to other people. She shied off when they came too near. She showed a definite distaste for intimacy, and shrank from exposure as she did from prying into other people's concerns, with a repressed nervous reaction of disgust that rarely showed on her dignified young surface but that was proved by her silence. Violet when she took Priscilla to London for that one brilliant season was at first rather non-plussed by the girl's dumbness, for Priscilla had no small talk and would sit at a dinner party in a white serene silence, her composure as complete as her indifference, with just a shade in it of sympathy, of regret for the uncomfortable man beside her. But Violet soon found it unnecessary to worry about Priscilla. Her delicate arrogant aloofness while it discouraged chatter excited a quite sufficient interest even in those men whom one would not have supposed gifted with much discrimination to make her a success. As Violet put it, she had the necessary *something*, and attracted more attention than did her own agreeable girls. All the same no one could be more disconcertingly silent than Priscilla on occasions when talk was expected of her. This was not perversity but simply habit and a grand way of assuming that it wasn't worth while being anything but natural, or trying to please anyone who wasn't pleased with her as she was. She did not care whether she was liked or not, and she took as a recognised social principle that it was better not to pretend

to be amused when one wasn't, because, pretending badly, the result would be the same only worse. There was no doubt a good deal of arrogance about all this. I suspect her of a touch of that ruthlessness which made old Reggie frequently stare through people as if they weren't there, but she was more subtle and complicated than her father, for whom many people in his neighbourhood did not exist. For Priscilla they existed to weary her and to draw out of her that grave apologetic glance that seemed to say—"I would talk to you if I could. Forgive me for not being interested," and her level grey eyes, her square white emaciated face seemed to have a strange power of winning the sympathy she deliberately repelled.

Her voice was vigorous and deep, pitched in an unusually low key, so low that if it had not had an overtone of a reedy vibrating quality one would have called it a bass voice.

I realise perfectly that in starting out to describe her voice I have so far described only her silence, but that is the sort of thing that happens in one's dealings with Priscilla. You can't do with her as you choose, you must do what she allows and compels. She is a mettlesome young thing who cannot be rushed. One must keep one's distance. One must wait to catch the look, the tone, the gesture that one longs for, and she keeps you waiting, oh indefinitely. Her abrupt chuckle, her quick hearty laugh, for instance, would come when one least expected it and when one waited for it expectantly one waited in vain.

I suppose that the timbre of a woman's voice has something to do with the formation of her chest and the shape of her mask. A human being is a sort of fiddle. There is a resonance and a beauty of tone in a good violin that no artist can draw from a cheap one. Well, Priscilla's deep chest or broad cheek bones or round, strong throat or whatever it was that produced her voice, perhaps the whole of her frame, was a Stradivarius, and her voice came from it, full, deep, compact and resonant, so compact as to seem almost solid, anyhow the reverse of hollow, so resonant as

to seem instead of breathy, absolutely independent of breathing, and indeed I remember her at breathless panting moments and once when she was very ill, speaking with that same clear, strong, incisive utterance. She could not whisper. When other people whispered, in a sick room for instance, her voice remained low and clear in spite of her. It was as if her voice could not be stealthy, could not creep or flutter or disguise itself even to suit someone she cared for. Milly Birch, on the other hand, was given to whispering when there was no necessity or excuse for it. I remember the curious sound of those two voices, Milly's whispering questions, Priscilla's loud, deep answers, a grotesque duet throughout which the high sibilant staccato invariably prevailed.

It was in a sudden gust of pity for Priscilla that Violet had taken her to London for "a bit of fun" as she called it. Violet had no patience with Agatha, referred to her as that saintly lunatic, and spoke to her plainly when they met, which was seldom. Her sympathies were all for Reggie, who put up with his wife's idiosyncracies with what she considered an exemplary tolerance. She liked Reggie in a mild way, though a very little of his society bored her, and took a spasmodic interest in Priscilla. "There is something to be made of the girl," she would say, with her shrewd, approving eye looking Priscilla up and down. "She's got personality, and she's well built. I wonder what she'll make of her predicament." But Violet's attention was fleeting. She couldn't bother about anyone much or for long. Once she had taken Priscilla to make her bow at Buckingham Palace, had ordered her frocks and got her cards to all the smart parties and had introduced her with her own girls to a couple of hundred people at a dance she gave at Claridge's, I suspect she forgot about her. I do not mean that she neglected her or let her go about alone and unchaperoned, but that she simply fitted Priscilla in to her social machine and forgot to note with any special interest the friends she was making or the men she danced

with. She was accustomed to such extreme docility from her daughters, was so wearily sure of their propriety, that it did not occur to her to wonder what Priscilla was getting out of it all or what she was perhaps putting into it. She was, for instance, unaware of the friendship that had sprung up between Priscilla and Puss Featherstone until the alliance between the two girls was a *fait accompli*. Her remark when the intimacy was brought to her notice was characteristic. "Puss Featherstone and Priscilla inseparable? And what would you have me do about it? The girl's mother is one of my dearest friends. You can't expect me to tell poor Mary that her daughter isn't fit for my charge."

Violet would never brook criticism. Any slightest disapproval of her action sent her whirling away in a cloud of derisive disdain. She hated busybodies. She couldn't bear people who felt responsible for their neighbours. Her theory was that well-bred people knew how to look after themselves and that the others didn't matter. If Priscilla had gone on the rocks that summer Violet would have been mortified. It would simply have been to her a proof that she had made a mistake in taking an interest in the girl.

And when Agatha, some months afterwards, came to her in great trouble to ask what had happened to Priscilla in London, she was furious.

"Priscilla in a scrape in town? That's nonsense! She is incapable of such stupidity. And do you suppose, my poor dear, that I was asleep with those girls on my hands or that with all their parties they had time to get into mischief? Really, Agatha, you do try me. One would suppose that you thought I had thrown your child into the arms of very vulgar people. I assure you I know none."

The implied accusation of carelessness must have rankled however, for she brought up the subject again with me when I returned from abroad, a year after Priscilla's marriage. She was rather vague about the actual events of the girl's season by that time. She had been busy

marrying off her own daughters. She mixed up so easily one season with another. London was always repeating itself. Priscilla had been no trouble at all as far as she remembered, had seemed to enjoy herself, had been a distinct success. Several eligible young men had shewn her very marked attentions, but she really couldn't remember much about them. What she did remember was Agatha's making a scene when she came down to Jericho Sands in November. She had gone abroad in August, had run down for poor Reggie's funeral only to spend the night. Her tiresome half-hour with Agatha had been postponed till much later, but even then, after three months, Agatha had seemed to her more than half demented. There had been something peculiarly painful about the way her face shook and quivered under her streaming tears. Her eyes were red, her nose was red. "She accused me, if you please, of introducing Priscilla to a wild set in town. She intimated that Priscilla had, well, kicked over the traces. I was really quite annoyed with her."

We were sitting in the south walled garden. Violet tapped an arched foot impatiently, leaned her lovely head on her hand, and sighed. Was there a wild set in London in those days? If there was she had ignored it. One really hadn't time to notice that sort of thing. To Agatha of course it would all seem dreadful. Agatha had no sense and nothing to go by. Any woman who painted her lips was a harlot. Agatha in London—Violet smiled, but presently frowned, and turning to me abruptly, opened suddenly very wide her celebrated eyes.

"It's all idiotic. Why, Priscilla came home and married a parson. If that isn't proof——"

I threw a pebble into the lily pond.

"It might be a proof that there had been something to trouble the child," I muttered, feeling guilty towards Priscilla as I said it.

"Ah," I remember the impatient movement of Vi's splendid shoulders as she rose with this exclamation, and

the lift of her arched eyebrows as she stood looking down at me. For a moment she stared at me curiously, as if suspecting me too of some indelicacy toward herself, of even blaming her for something, as Agatha had done, but Violet could not seriously conceive of such a thing from a crony of Tupper's, and presently treated me to her ravishing smile.

"Don't be silly, Tweedle," she said sweetly, with that suave softness that was such a perfect luxurious covering for her sharpness. "It was lucky for Priscilla that she married so quickly after Reggie's death, and you know it. What else was there for her to do? You wouldn't have had her live on in that house with her mother, I suppose? All the same it's a pity in a way that she chose Simon Birch. Almost any stupid young man with a nice circle of friends would have been better. Of course he's a gentleman, but even then. I suppose it was his pretty face. Women seem to like that kind of beauty, though I wouldn't have thought Priscilla—but does one ever understand why any one likes anyone else?"

We took a turn round the pond.

"The fact is that she might have done much better for herself and might have done worse. She could have filled an important position I mean, had it in her to carry off almost anything. I could see that from the way she behaved in crowds. On the other hand there was something dangerous, a queer streak. Occasionally she laughed in a strange sort of way, I remember now, something savage about it, abrupt. How shall I put it? And she attracted the big brute type. But I don't want to exaggerate. She interested me you know, now that I think of it. My girls were all right, but insipid. Priscilla had character. She was almost boringly indifferent for the most part, quite absurdly intolerant, looked down her nose at the men all the girls were mad about, snubbed them beautifully. I didn't mind that. It amused me. It was only when she was excited, like a child, that she gave one that curious impres-

sion. It had nothing to do with being silly or flirtatious. One simply can't imagine her giggling, but one caught glimpses of something daring and reckless. I wonder if she hadn't married Simon whether she would not have made things exciting in Europe—a *grande amoureuse* perhaps. Ah well, she's safely settled." Violet sighed again, this time with finality. She had suddenly exhausted her subject. Priscilla bored her. So did I. We were both dismissed from her mind as she floated magnificently, smoothly away.

That was all Violet ever told me about Priscilla's doings in London. The rest, such as it is, was supplied by the girl Puss Featherstone, whom I never liked, though we did make friends in a sort of way during the dreadful days when Priscilla was so ill. She gave me an impression of what had occurred. She gave it in bits, in little scrappy allusions, in the way she would grin suddenly at the mention of a name, of a place, but she gave it most of all just by the fact of herself, installed there for long visits in Priscilla's house. That Priscilla should have chosen such a grim creature as her bosom friend was in itself very curious.

She wasn't at all my kind of a girl. Whether she was a bad lot as some people said, or "a very good sort," as Priscilla stoutly maintained to the last, I cannot say. Doubtless she was both. One can be a bad lot and a good sort at one and the same time I suppose, and I am obliged to admit that the facts go to prove that she was genuinely fond of Priscilla, and although she lived by her wits at the expense of her friends, when it came to the point she did play up. She was loyal, for her object was, I gather, to marry Crab Willing and to instal herself at Jericho Sands.

She hadn't a penny. Her mother, Lady Mary, spent her winters in Monte Carlo, her summers in some other gambling resort. The girl was on her own in England. I had heard of her of course, and had seen her flaunting her

charms about London, long before Priscilla met her. Her mother, Lady Mary, was an old acquaintance, and had bemoaned to me herself that the girl hadn't a sou. Priscilla said she had pluck. No doubt she had. It would take, I should think, a colossal nerve to keep up the pace of Crab Willing's set on an empty pocket book.

How she kept it up I don't know. She had, of course, a number of respectable relatives to whom she could look for bed and breakfast, or a restful week in the country, but these on the whole bored her. She only went to them to recoup herself, and they did not at all approve of her. No one that I knew did approve of her. My old cronies in town lifted their hands in horror at the mention of her name. "Quite impossible, dear friend, quite. No one knows who pays for her frocks, though some say—but there, we'd rather not talk about it. It seems such a pity for poor foolish Mary's child."

But Puss didn't care what anyone thought of her. She would show her teeth in a snarl and be rude if any of her mother's friends tried to patronise her. She enjoyed being rude. On the other hand she could be sweet as syrup when there was anything to be gained by it. Priscilla knew this perfectly well, yet declared she was straight as a die. Perhaps the girl's insincerity was professional and did not matter. It may be that she put it on deliberately with her smart clothes, and in the privacy of friendship was just an obstinate, independent, downright creature who knew what she wanted and, like Crab, was determined to get it. What she wanted was, to begin with, a good time. What she ultimately aimed at was to make a brilliant or at any rate a rich marriage.

Priscilla used to say of her—"She's so awfully game, Bill. She never cries out when she's hurt. You've no idea what she's been through."

I felt somehow that it showed. I didn't care for her looks. She was much too like a cat for me. I expected constantly to see her arch her back, bare her claws and

pounce. She had long blinking eyes, set too wide apart, and a very wide mouth with curiously curved lips that broadened into a large engaging but almost indecently frank grin. Her eyes and her mouth cut great slices in her small face. They obliterated the rest of her small dark head. There was something dazzling and brazenly humorous about them. Her figure was much admired. It was very elastic. Had she, for fun, with a pull, elongated an arm to twice its normal length and then let it snap back into shape I would not have been surprised.

She broke out to me one day on the subject of Priscilla's marriage to Simon.

"You ought to have stopped it," she said suddenly, and then—"She would never have done it if it hadn't been for that beast." But she didn't go on. She didn't explain to whom she referred. It was on another occasion that she came out with—"Priscilla is such a fool. She doesn't mind what anyone else does, but she comes down on herself like a sledge hammer. Fancy crying all night because you'd had a glass too much of champagne and found a man trying to maul you? And she wasn't the least bit tipsy. Only she thought she was, and took it so hard that she married a saint. Good God, what a price to pay for one glass of champagne too much."

And again, later on, when we sat together in an unendurable suspense awaiting the result of the operation that was going to deprive Priscilla of her baby and perhaps save her life, she ground her teeth together and hissed out at me—"I gave Priscilla an awful shock, you know. It was partly my fault, all this business of her marrying Simon. I had been chucked by a man and was head over ears in debt and didn't see much point in trying to carry on, so I thought I'd turn on the gas, but it didn't work, I didn't do it properly. It only made me sick as a dog for two days. Priscilla found out. She came in, you know, and found me, and I was so damned ill that I told her the whole thing. She paid a lot of my bills, but it didn't do her a bit of good, knowing about

my wretched affairs, I could see that. She never said a word, but she went absolutely green. That was just before the silly business of the picnic party on the Thames. There seemed to be some connection in her mind between the two, between us two. Funny, isn't it?" Puss gave a sort of laugh, sob, something of the kind, then bared her teeth. "Men are beasts of course, but why should she have bothered about that? Bless her heart, what a fool!" She squirmed in her chair, twisted about, turned her back on me.

I had my clue. I knew all that I wanted to know about the mysterious affair in London. I saw it all and winced at the sight. Her words gave Priscilla's secret away, and revealed her to me as she would have wished never to be revealed to anyone. And I was amazed and a little frightened by the virginal quality of her spirit thus exposed. She had lived so much with her father, had been so constantly thrown with men, that I had thought of her as something of a tomboy, as finely, beautifully, tough, and she had kept her little crystal heart hidden even from me. I might have known, I suppose, that there was something there in her side as sensitive as the thinnest goblet of crystal, something that resounded to the slightest touch, as a glass does, with a long, long, slowly dying shivering music, but I had not till then divined it. She herself had deceived me. I had not taken into sufficient account her extraordinary pride. I did not know that this girl who dealt so calmly with all manner of men and women, who could understand her father's amorous escapades, who could listen to his oaths and to jockey's jokes and stable talk with amused indifference, was guarding all the time in her deep chest, fiercely as a tiger, a little blinding white fearsome innocence.

And I had forgotten that she was only a child when she went to London, but I understood at last and I could imagine exactly what had happened. I imagined her suddenly discovering something reckless, some impulse to extravagant gaiety, to savage exuberance, in herself, and

I saw her, waking all of a sudden out of her silence, shaken out of her absurd child's hauteur, seized by some unexpected emotion that was gay and primitive, laughing aloud then, abruptly, tossing off another glass of wine, looking with brilliant young eyes at some man that appeared all at once more attractive than she had thought him, and I see the brute, misinterpreting the sound of her laughter, respond to what he judged was her mood of invitation. Poor Priscilla, furiously sobbing her heart out because she had been seized and kissed on a picnic by a man whose name she didn't know, whose face she could not remember, and who had dealt a sickening blow to her pride. She had turned her back in a rage of mortification on London, had taken the train for home the very next day, and had been met at the station with the news that her father had been thrown from his horse and killed that afternoon.

It was, for her, like being struck by lightning. Her maid, Sarah Boots, told me that she went down like a log, on her knees on the station platform, and seemed for a moment to be beating the air with her hands, but made no sound and did not speak all that evening, even to her mother. But in the night, Boots, finding her young mistress's bed empty, went down the long draughty corridor to the room where the Colonel's body was lying, and listening at the door, heard Priscilla's deep voice repeating with desperate clearness—

"Come back to me, Daddy. I need you. Come back. Come back. I wanted to ask you something. I wanted to tell you. Can't you speak to me? Can't you talk to me just once more? I wanted to ask you if it mattered much. I wanted to tell you. Daddy, speak to me. Speak to me once. Tell me. Tell me everything. Come back, Daddy, come back. Where are you? Where have you gone? Is it true what Mummy says? If you are there, speak to me, speak to me just once more."

And Reggie, who, if his spirit lingered near, must have been straining to lift his body up out of that death bed

with a great hearty laugh of reassurance was helpless to comfort his girl.

I am trying to piece things together that came to me from various sources at various times, and to explain as carefully as possible how it came about that Priscilla did marry Simon. I do not agree with Puss Featherstone. It was not as simple as all that. Left to herself Priscilla would have recovered as quickly as any healthy girl from her disagreeable experience, but she was not left to herself. She and Agatha were stranded together, and shipwrecked on the great hushed lonely shore of their common grief they clung to each other as they had never done when Reggie was alive.

I do not know what passed between them, but I can imagine that when all the horrible business of putting Reggie into the ground was over, and the big, bare, ugly house was empty, that Priscilla in her loneliness turned to her mother for comfort, flung herself on that suffering shrunken breast for warmth, and found in her arms a poor helpless creature, so broken, so clinging, so pitiful, so bewildered, that she resolved then and there to do anything, everything, whatever lay in her power to make her mother happy.

She has told me herself that her mother seemed at times scarcely sane, and kept asking her—"Don't you think, Priscilla, that during the minute before he died he might have repented? There was time you know. There must have been. He couldn't have died like that, cursing God, could he, Priscilla? In between, after he had said those dreadful words, there was still time, wasn't there? A few seconds is enough, isn't it, Priscilla?"

And Priscilla would lie and lie to comfort her, and would repeat mechanically the words—"But of course, Mummy, but of course he's in Heaven. He was good, you know. He didn't mean anything by his swearing."

"You think not?"

"I'm sure of it."

"You think that God will forgive him?"

"I am sure God understands."

"Oh my darling, my darling, I have been so lonely, but I always felt sure that your father would come back to me in the end. I had faith. Now it's too late. Promise me you will never forget, never forget the terrible danger of leaving things till it is too late. I am so frightened, Priscilla, frightened for Reggie. Don't let me be frightened for you too, Priscilla. Promise me you will pray. Promise me you will pray to come to love God. Pray to be forgiven of your sins."

And Priscilla promised and Priscilla prayed.

Sin? Priscilla shivered. Sin? What was it? Hadn't she felt sick in the pit of her stomach that night in London? Didn't she feel sick now at the memory of her past indifference, her cruelty to her mother? Hadn't she and Reggie been selfish brutes? Wasn't she ashamed? What was shame but a sense of sin?

"Pray with me, Priscilla. I have prayed alone so long for your father to come back, and now it's too late."

Priscilla went down on her knees. Agatha's emotion swept over her like a flood.

In the days that followed the girl only partially came to her senses. She was more miserable than ever, but she didn't know why.

"Anything," she would mutter, "anything to get out of this. Anything to make Mummy happy."

Then Simon came along. He had taken orders some years before and had been working down by the docks in the east end of London. His health had broken down, his elder brother had died, and he had come home to occupy the family living.

Priscilla as she looked at him had a sense of fatality. He did not appeal to her. He did not seem to her to be a man at all. They had known each other as children, but that had no significance. He was a part of the dream now, that was at times like a nightmare.

Simon was a very beautiful young man, but not at all her sort. I say beautiful, because he was beautiful. I cannot use the word handsome, nor the word pretty. Though his looks were effeminate there was a dark fiery radiance about him in his young days that almost amounted to splendour. Without that fire he would have been sickening. As it was, one could smile at the perfection of his delicate clearly chiselled features, at the pretty crinkled waves of his dark hair that rushed back from his high forehead, at the curling of his long eyelashes and the sentimental hollows in his cheeks, but one could not sneer at the brilliance of his eyes. They glowed with a sombre flame. They had a searching questioning ardent gaze. They were the burning restless eyes of an honest mystic.

There was nothing in all this that would have had any effect on Priscilla under normal conditions, but her state was not normal. She was exhausted by her lonely pitiful struggle with Agatha. Agatha's mind wobbled in her hands. A clumsy movement and it would be hurt beyond repair.

Agatha adored Simon. They were, it appeared, this worn, prematurely aged, yet childlike woman, and this fiery radiant youth, kindred spirits. Priscilla observing them together felt the net closing round her, but she was too tired to struggle. After all, what did it matter? If it made her mother happy, if it restored her serenity, if it relieved the strain and stopped that awful praying, wasn't that something? Simon was fate. He was also a means of escape.

Moreover she had been frightened in London. With Simon she would be safe. Simon was good.

When he told her that he loved her, she repressed a sudden welling up of repulsion. He did not seem to notice. He was so much in earnest that he captured her attention, diverted it from herself. His eloquence soothed her. She was touched, surprised, a little bewildered. He did not seem to want to caress her. She was grateful for that. She observed a distinct difference in him from the usual run

of men. She was impressed by his intellect. His passion was a flame that left her cold, but at the same time it illumined the space about her. And it restored to her her self-respect. She informed him that she would make a very bad wife for a parson.

"Only trust me," he assured her, "and all will be well."

She decided to do so. She was too tired to bother, and if her mother were right about it all, then marrying Simon, whom she was fond of though he did not as a man appeal to her, marrying him simply and solely for the sake of his "goodness," in spite, indeed just because of not really wanting to, would be the sort of thing that would save her from going, as she put it, to the bad.

Her note reached me in Athens.

"DEAR BILL,

"I am to be married to Simon to-morrow. Mummy is awfully pleased and has bought a new frock for the wedding. I think I am glad you won't be here. You would be sentimental about it and think he wasn't good enough for me, but you would be wrong. Simon's an angel. So send me your blessing.

"Yours,

"PRISCILLA."

CHAPTER III

MILLY BIRCH was an excellent housekeeper, a genius at catering for man's baser appetites. The beautiful, grave old manor under her deft busy fingers oozed luxury. No beds in all the county were so soft, no lavender-scented linen sheets so fine, no chairs so conducive to lazy ease, no dishes so succulent. Her soups, good, substantial, rich mixtures of vegetables and meat, were famous, her iced puddings no less so. Victuals seemed to take on a special quality in her kitchen. The fish curled in the frying pan more crisply, with a gayer quirk of their tails, than in other houses, the piping hot potatoes were of a whiter flakiness, the cutlets were fatter and came from the grill a richer, more glossy brown, the fowls burst their crackly skins with seductive impatience, their tender white flesh glistening, the leaves of her lettuces were crimped as if by a special artist, and Milly appreciated the value of her wine cellar that Edward had left behind him, far more than he, dear man, had ever done. She had made herself acquainted with every vintage it contained, and knew the exact place of each dusty bottle. "I think we might have a pint of that pale dry Bordeaux, the 1884 Château, for luncheon," she would announce brightly, flicking her keys at Minchin, the admirable parlourmaid. "It is on the left, fourth shelf from the bottom. It will do very nicely with the spiced ham." And she was right. It did very nicely indeed. It was just the thing. She had a man's palate. An extraordinary woman. She looked as if she lived on bird seed. Not that one ever caught her being greedy. She ate carefully and quietly, with a serene appearance of not eating at all, but if you watched her plate you noticed that liberal quantities of good things disappeared from it into her small,

prim, pretty mouth. How she could put it all away without its turning to fat is beyond me. She remained as light as a feather. I suppose it was her endless fidgeting. She was never idle, never still, never in a room for more than five minutes, and never, on the other hand, out of it if anyone were there for more than ten. She would go out of one door and come in at another, fluttering apologetically, her inquisitive little head on one side, her near-sighted blue eyes screwed up, her delicate nose wrinkling and twitching. Her face, and the way she rounded her back and jumped away, reminded me at times of a rabbit. But she was immensely capable and took herself very seriously.

It was for Simon that she did it all, at any rate she believed this. Much as she liked comfort herself, it was for Simon that she toiled. The easy chairs, the shaded lamps, the warm glowing fires, were all for him. Simon was delicate and high strung and nervous. Simon must have rest, Simon must have quiet, Simon's nerves must be soothed. If only she could make him fat. But it was not his health alone that preoccupied her. She had a higher purpose than that of merely keeping him alive. She believed profoundly in Simon's vocation and in her ability to share it. There was for her a high spiritual significance in the task she had set herself. She saw herself in the rôle of Martha who ministered to her Lord. "I'm not intellectual, you know," she once said to me, with a sigh, "I cannot always understand Simon. He has such wonderful ideas, but I do, you see, what I can to help him. Sometimes, if you will believe it, I feel I've a share in his writing because I buy the paper and pens. I clean his fountain pen myself every morning. You'll think me very foolish, I suppose."

She had a rapt ecstatic expression as she spoke. Exasperating and pathetic creature, she had really an exalted idea of her own vocation, and was convinced that she was in her way collaborating with Simon in the preparation of his thoughtful sermons, that were so much over the

heads of his country congregation, and in the writing of his book that was a fiery theological refutation of the theory of evolution, based on the premise that no scientific discovery could possibly be of any value unless in some mysterious way it corroborated the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and could be made to fit in with the drama of the garden of Eden. Milly Birch was, of course, well acquainted with Adam and Eve and the Serpent, and a complete stranger to Darwin or any other thinker, but had it been the other way about she would not have questioned the value of Simon's efforts. It was not necessary for her to know what he was writing to be certain that a blinding vision of the truth would flash upon the world when the book came from the printing press. It was enough for her to look into Simon's burning eyes. They reflected for her the light of Heaven. She was illuminated by their refracted rays ; she worshipped God by proxy ; she served Him by ministering to her son's physical needs so that his spirit might burn with a brighter flame, and because of her own dingy youth she could not possibly understand Simon or believe in his theory that too much good living is bad for the soul. No winged spirit had ever, to her knowledge, been born in a lodging-house and nourished on cabbage. She knew what she knew. She drew a dreadful moral from her own dismal experience, and remembered the bitterness of her mother and the discontent of her gossiping neighbours. It was all characterised in her mind as low.

How could she not believe in the value for Simon of what to her was so precious ? The fleshpots of Crech represented for her the dreams of her starved girlhood come true. Never would she become so used to them as to lose her sense of something miraculous in luxury. It was a part of her small, concentrated, obstinate nature to remember vividly what she had been doomed to, and to find on her lips, mingling with the flavour of sauces, the added savour of magic. A pineapple was not merely a

pineapple to Milly Birch. It was a mysterious, joy-giving, symbolical fruit like the Apple of the Hesperides.

And so it was that she could not conceive of being mistaken in her treatment of Simon, and could not take seriously his periodic efforts to throw off the silk mufflers with which she was suffocating him. She never saw that he was as stifled by it all as if she were holding him down softly and firmly in a feather bed. His nerves, that were in part at any rate the result of his struggle to combat what she was doing to him, were understood by her as being the very proof that she was not doing enough, and not doing it sufficiently well. She would wring her little hands when he was impatient and flutter away disconsolately and try to efface herself, while she concocted some scheme of greater perfection in the ordering of his house. I believe she was under the illusion that she effaced herself almost completely. When he was at work in his study she resisted five out of six times the temptation to go in and see if the fire was burning brightly. She would hover about in the hall outside his closed door and with her ear to the wood panel and a finger on her lips, would say to Priscilla or anyone else who came tramping in from outdoors, "Hssh! He must not be interrupted." And if you did by chance catch her coming out of the sanctum, she would close the door with exquisite nerve-racking care, making it swing to with a long slow tiny squeaking, and would whisper shamefacedly, "I didn't speak to him. I just put the tea-tray on the table and came away. He was so deep in his work, he didn't even see me."

Poor Milly Birch, admirable daughter of a lodging-house keeper, it had been her lot to cater beautifully for the imaginary wants of two men, father and son, of Edward, who cared not a halfpenny for luxury, of Simon, who was tortured by it.

"Do have a little more fish, Simon dear."

"No thank you, Mother."

"But I ordered it specially for you, my darling. Billykin

chose his nicest, freshest turbot. He knows how particular I am."

"Yes, yes, dear, it was very nice."

"Then do have a little more, Simon. There's nothing but a roast fowl and a chocolate soufflé to follow, and you look so tired."

"You must excuse me, Mother."

He would pass his hand over his forehead. He was rarely impatient with her, but his slender cheeks would sometimes flush with annoyance, and occasionally he would say, very gently, with a little discouraged smile on his beautiful mouth—"If you had your way with me, Mother, I would be too besotted with food and drink to do anything but sleep."

But she was of course incorrigible, and after dinner would confide in whispers to any visitor who was present, that—"He was a bundle of nerves, just a bundle of nerves, and that if she were not there to look after him he would simply not be able to stand the strain," and while one was looking about the long, low, wainscotted room for any evidence of tension or tumult in his environment, she would trip across the floor and put a pillow behind his back where he did not want it, calling into being by so doing that small nervous spasm that she devoutly believed she was smoothing away.

But not even the busy presence of Milly Birch could vulgarise that house or trouble its dignity. It's atmosphere remained grave, benign, exquisitely courteous, for all her fussing. Calmly, with a perfect aged courtliness, it absorbed her, and turned to the stranger its worn, welcoming, gentle countenance. Peace descended upon the wayfarer within those walls. He became aware of an excellent propriety that was a happy and exact combination of formality and ease. The rooms were spacious, the ceilings low, the windows set in deep niches. There was a medley of old used furniture. The tables and chairs were at home. They had settled down into their

places. They understood each other. One could imagine them reminiscing sociably together in the quiet hours of the night, recalling how Clarissa Birch, Edward's great-grandmother, had in her sprightly daring chosen a cherry coloured damask for the settee in 1790, or how a former Simon had come home from the Peninsular War to put his wooden leg on the firestool, or how poor ailing Lavinia, who had wanted to go into a convent, had spent three years over the tapestried seats of the two high-backed chairs in the alcove.

A gentleman's house: it admitted modern plumbing, half-a-dozen bathrooms and electric light, without wincing. Certainly it could adapt itself to the times and remain wrapt in its tranquil dreams. The church bells pealed out over its roof with the same gentle clamour as of old, the great trees murmured in the park, the cuckoos called from the wood, cattle lowed in the fields, there was the cooing of doves in the dovecot by the kitchen door, the scent of roses and mignonette and lavender was wafted in from the garden. These things had always been so. The life of the house was unchanged. It was unafraid, untroubled, serene, content to shelter the passing generations of this family who were born, who lived, who died, under its peaked roof, and who left each one his faint scarce traceable imprint on the steady walls, the strong polished floors, the hoary venerable stones.

What I would like to make clear is that the old Manor did its best for Simon and Priscilla, taking a benevolent part in their drama, providing a calm and steady background for their lives, making for dignity and reserve and all that is decent and best in our English life. Had it had its way there would have been no story for me to tell. The personalities of these people and their passionate individualities would have remained muffled, their actions restrained. Creech was all on the side of conventional behaviour, of good form, of a high and austere denial of man's right to be other than true to

type. The doctrine of that house was the doctrine of good taste.

Priscilla felt this. The house reassured her on the day she entered it as a bride. It seemed to receive her with an honourable and reserved graciousness that conveyed a recognition of her own worth as its mistress. It's formality was a guarantee, it's historic beauty a promise. She sank down into it's cool decorous embrace with a feeling of immense relief, of immediate contentment.

I remember being struck by the harmony between Priscilla and the house that was now her home on the day of my first visit to Creech on returning from abroad. Priscilla had been married then about a year. She was coming to greet me down the wide dark stairway in a pink frock as I entered the hall. Her fair head was silvery against the dark panelling. Her slim white foot was reflected in the polished surface of the step. At the sight of me she gave a pleased cordial laugh. "Bill," she called in her deep strong young voice, holding out both hands. She was surprisingly herself. She seemed younger if anything than when I had left her two years before, and as I looked at her standing there, straight and fair in the dim lustrous panelled place, I realised that for the first time I was seeing her in an environment that set her off, that framed her youth in a frame of such appropriate dignity that at last her severe loveliness was given its right value. She was the same blend of the great lady and the boy that she had been, but in her father's hideous barrack her looks and her personality had not had a chance. Here she rose up, slim, straight and serene as a sturdy lily, and the gleaming wood around her, the old mirrors, the crystal pendants from the heavy brackets, caught her fairness, reflected her, made her precious, emphasised gravely and precisely the beauty of her gestures and her movements.

Her greeting was as terse as usual, and as always she took everything for granted. It did not occur to her to

explain anything, or to remark upon her marriage. I could, I gathered, take it or leave it. Whether or not our intimacy was to survive depended entirely upon myself. One thing was clear. I was to ask no questions, and if I were stupid enough to show any curiosity, my curiosity must go unsatisfied.

She led me at once into the garden with the words—"The house is Bunny's business, the garden is mine," but on the stone flags before the south door she took my arm and wheeled me about and looked up at the steep grey gables.

"Isn't it delicious? I love it!" she said in her deep decided voice. "That's my window. It looks out, you see, on the garden. There's a swallow's nest in the corner, just there."

Tea was laid in the pergola. It was June. The sunlight flowed in a liquid golden sheen over our leafy roof, scattering ephemeral golden discs on the ground. The tea table gleamed and shone. Beyond, the flowers glowed with the rich brilliance of evening. Their perfume was heavy on the quiet air. Milly presided at the tea-table. She offered us hot buttered scones and honey and toasted tea-cakes and a large sticky chocolate cake black as night, and strawberries and cream. Priscilla did justice to it all. She was in the middle of her second dish of strawberries when Simon appeared at the end of the brick wall. Mrs. Birch, who had been smiling appreciatively upon Priscilla's greediness, jumped up at once and trotted to meet him. When they presently advanced together between the hollyhocks and delphiniums she was clinging to his arm and looking up into his face, radiant as a withered sweet-heart.

I looked at Priscilla. She was leaning lazily back in her wicker chair, her saucer in her hand, a large crimson berry poised in her spoon.

"I'm afraid I can't finish these," she said, "it's a pity."

Milly's voice trilled along the sunlight, "He has finished his chapter. He finished his chapter this afternoon."

Simon's sensitive face expressed his feeling that this was an inappropriate way in which to greet a friend who had not been to Creech for two years or more. He took my hand in his that was cold and damp. He showed a charming interest in my affairs while he mopped the unhealthy moisture from his forehead. Had I come home to stay for a time? Was I bringing out a new book? Had I enjoyed Greece? Did I find Priscilla looking well? His manner was an attractive blend of deference and affection. He and Priscilla had been deeply disappointed not to have me at their wedding. They greatly valued my exquisite wedding present. He expressed himself in these terms. The words "deeply grieved," "greatly valued," I remember noting at the time, and I recall wishing that with his ethereal boyish beauty and radiant smile of welcome he could have let himself go in a little slang. His careful pedantic language gave, strangely enough, an undertone of primness and of sadness to the little picnic meal. It conveyed to me a sense of mistaken values, of unnecessary seriousness, and it accentuated somehow the narrowness of his shoulders, his forehead, his face. As the words "exquisite workmanship," descriptive of my little cloisonné vase, left his lips, I noticed for the first time that his eyes were too close together.

Simon talked a great deal, drank three cups of tea and ate none of his mother's good things, much to that lady's distress. Priscilla silently smoked a cigarette. I listened and watched.

Simon was eloquent. I cannot remember what he talked about, but I remember the musical tones of his voice that made a sedate old-fashioned tune, rather stiff, rather prim, rather coldly classic and at the same time tumultuous, something like a Bach fugue, and I remember realising all of a sudden in the midst of it that he was not

being natural. He was talking against time. He was composing. He was saying those things in order not to say others, and I began to wonder what it was that he wanted so much to say and didn't.

His eyes were restless. They travelled from one of us to the other, then fixed themselves on the ground at his feet, but more and more often as the moments passed, they came back to Priscilla and dwelt on her face with an unguarded intensity, with at last such an undisguised longing that it scarcely needed his sudden confusion, his losing the thread of his conversation, and his painful flush, to reveal to me that only one thing preoccupied him, namely, the mystery that was Priscilla.

I had then a feeling of fright, why I do not know. Was it a premonition resulting from my knowledge of these people? Certainly there was nothing in the discovery that a man was in love with his wife to frighten any sane person. I remarked to myself that I was a fool and that it was inevitable and right that Simon should be deeply enamoured. I observed Milly Birch and saw that she was blind as a bat. I observed Priscilla. She was apparently serene, unaware of Simon's scrutiny. Her eyes were half closed, her cigarette drooped from her fingers that hung over the arm of her chair, her legs were stretched comfortably out, her feet crossed, but as I turned from this picture of lazy contentment I met Simon's gaze, and at once the phrase formed itself in my mind, "He will talk if she won't. He can't help himself."

And it was so. He jumped up quickly and invited me to take a turn with him in the garden. I hesitated. He laid a nervous hand on my arm. I felt myself reluctantly dragged to my feet. Priscilla watched us go with a lazy smile.

But when he got me away, to himself, he did not at first say much. It was as if he drew back at the edge of the little precipice. His good breeding held him back, his nervous distrust egged him on. It was all very strange.

I gathered, to begin with, that what he wanted yet loathed to do was not to talk but to question and to make me talk, but he hesitated and did not get for some time beyond the tentative, wistful statement that I had known Priscilla since she was a child.

I didn't help him. Indeed, I did my best to discourage him. I seemed to be witnessing a struggle between a man's curiosity and his sense of decency, and I wanted him, of course, to be decent. It was of the greatest importance to us all, I reflected, that he should be. I remembered Edward, his father, who had never in all the years of our intimacy alluded to Milly save in the most formal terms.

I see now as I think back on that unpleasant hour with Simon fidgeting beside me in the lovely shining garden, that the comparison was not fair, for there was nothing to wonder about or tantalise a man in Milly, and everything in Priscilla to baffle Simon. On the whole I do not blame Simon much. What is the good of blaming anyone for anything? Men don't make exhibitions of themselves for choice. They don't give themselves away till they have to. They repress what is bothering them as long as they can. Simon did not want to discuss his wife. He was ashamed of doing it. His face turned crimson every time he opened his mouth. He was continually pulling himself up, breaking off and turning away from me with a twisting jerk only to come back again like a dog on the end of a chain.

I know now what it was he wanted. He wanted to be told that his marriage with Priscilla was bound to come out all right. Astonished to find that the formulas of his belief did not interest Priscilla, he had already begun to doubt her worth. He wanted me, the wise, wicked old man, the tiresome but trustworthy family friend, to tell him not to worry. Although he detested my point of view on things in general, which he no doubt characterised as heathen, he turned to me in his trouble as he would

have turned to his father had Edward been alive. He wanted me to give him a good sound parental scolding. It was to obtain this that he blurted out his feelings in such an unseemly manner. And he did, of course, end by annoying me and did get his scolding. There was a moment when I shouted out at him: "Why, in God's name, can't you keep your feelings to yourself like any other Englishman?" The answer was all too clear. He was not like other Englishmen. He was not like anyone of his own class. He belonged with the lonely hermit saints who in the early days of the Christian Church sought out bleak hilltops and chill caverns to dwell in so that they might be near God, or failing this he would have been happy by the side of those men who in poverty and humility went out through the world to preach and to live the ineffable and impracticable ideals of the Sermon on the Mount; these were his natural brothers, and he had the ill-luck to be born in England, in the twentieth century, to fall heir to a very substantial property and a good sound code of social ethics that were to him impossibly incongruous.

I think of him standing there that day in his garden, a charming young man, and I see him, now that it is all over, and he can no longer exasperate me with the tiresome antics of his conscience, as remarkable. Had he not been remarkable he would have been happy. He would have settled down peacefully in his beautiful home to the pleasant humdrum duties of his calling. All that he had to do was to read the services in the grave old church, let his parishioners adore him, and leave well enough alone. He couldn't. He believed that humanity was doomed and that he himself, possessed of the magic saving talisman, was responsible for saving it, and he felt that every pleasure, every beauty, every interest that distracted him from his life of meditation and intercession was a trap set for him by the Devil and that when he enjoyed such things he was guilty.

It is easy to see how such an obsession would work to make him miserable.

He said a thing that day in the garden that gave me a clue to his restlessness. We were standing looking across the lawn at the house, and suddenly he said, as if talking to himself, "I cannot understand why my brother Edward died. It seems all wrong. God's ways are very strange. I ought not to be here. There seems to have been a mistake in the general scheme of things, I mean. Edward was right here, I am wrong. I have no business here. It is too beautiful. I am afraid."

And then his eyes lighted with that strange burning light that sometimes illumined his face, and he murmured, "This, then, is the life of angels and of godlike and blessed men, a freedom from all that is earthly, a flight of the alone to the alone."

Poor Simon! In another age or in another walk of life he might have had a career, but what could he do in the respectable, sleepy pulpit of a little country church that was a small, neat stone firmly cemented into the great decent Church of England?

Much as I regret his mania, impossible as it was for me to be patient with him, I still cannot but pay a tribute to his honesty. He was a mystic. He laboured ceaselessly to be a saint. He never became a man of the world as many churchmen do. He took a very serious view of his profession, and his idea of what was involved was colossal. "The business of a Divine," he once said, "is to interpret the Mind of God."

Such phrases have a startling effect when spoken with the fresh voice of ardent youth. One's mind travels rapidly abroad, skims the several thousand pulpits in the Church of England, and hears the mind of God being explained in neat phrases by Snooks of Bramley, and Toots of Barminster and Boots of Bethnal Green, worthy gentlemen, no doubt, and modest, content to repeat the lessons they've learned by heart and to ask no questions.

But Simon was not content, and he had, alas, no sense of humour. It was no good to him saying one thing and doing the other. He was determined to live according to the rule of the Sermon on the Mount, and to combine this pastoral ideal with the tenets of the Church. The Holy Scriptures and the Prayer Book were to him the authentic and final revelation of the Will of God, as infallibly true as if God had held in His Hand the pen that wrote them down.

It is not my wish to make fun of him nor to be harsh with him. He was always very harsh with himself. The reading of his Confession is disarming. It fills me with pity. Though he muddled up lamentably his jealousy with his religious convictions, at bottom his real trouble was quite simply that he did with terrible sincerity believe in such documents as the Athanasian Creed and could not avoid the dreadful conclusion that Priscilla was damned.

One prefers, of course, to associate with Christians who comfortably compromise. One can't enjoy going about with beings who are relegating one to a Hell of fire and brimstone because one doesn't agree with them. It is lucky for us that our Bishops are Lords and live in palaces. But there you are: it wasn't Simon's fault that the fathers of the English Church laid down this doctrine, and one cannot hold him responsible. One can only muse upon the clemency of Providence, that is, of Time, which obscures so successfully the point of such grim manifestos and pulls comfortable wads of wool over the eyes of both the shepherds and the sheep of the Church.

I fear that the Christian religion would not survive in England many men as orthodox as Simon.

But there was more to him than orthodoxy. He was no bigot, but a haunted man. A face of supreme pathos, a spectre of unutterable beauty, rose before him, a voice said, "I died for men and they do know me."

His imagination had been touched in his sickly boyhood by that lonely figure on the Cross. A dreamer and a poor little bookworm he was. I used to come on him in the

library perched on stepladders devouring with reddened eyes the tales of Christian martyrs, or some quaint mediæval book on theology such as the *Theologia Germanica*, a little golden missal, "discovering the Mysteries, Sublimity, Perfection and Simplicity of Christianity in Belief and Practice, Printed for John Sweeting and sold at his shop at the Angel in Pope's Head Alley, 1646," a book which the English translator states, "setteth forth many fair Lineaments of Divine Truth and saith very lofty and lovely things touching a perfect life." A pleasing bit of writing. Edward commended the boy for his delight in it, and I can now understand his impatient dismissal of all that welter and confusion of so-called modern religious thought and higher criticism. Why, indeed, if one has faith at all should one bother about believing a little more or a little less? Simon didn't. To him it was all of an extreme simplicity. He believed the whole word of God and was content to accept its simplest meaning, and thus freed once and for all from intellectual bothers he could concentrate upon the life of mystic meditation which he loved.

What I find difficult to stomach is the excruciating way in which his conscience worked in regard to Priscilla. I got an inkling that day in the garden, though the full truth did not dawn on me for many a month. He began to talk in disjointed phrases, alluding indirectly to his marriage, saying something about Lady Agatha being so pleased, and something about the people of the parish adoring Priscilla, and something about his mother having no other home. Then suddenly as we turned off to the stables his face went crimson and he brought out with abrupt unnecessary emphasis the question, "You find Priscilla looking well?"

"Very well indeed."

"Ah, I am glad. Her life has gone on, you know, just as before. I've not interfered. She had her four hunters sent over from the Court on our return from Italy and has hunted all winter. Three days a week to hounds, and one day's beagling."

"Splendid."

He eyed me curiously, not suspiciously, but with a troubled, wistful intensity, the flush fading from his face.

"You think I was right, you mean she needs it? She does, doesn't she? Yes, yes, I am sure you understand her. She is an outdoor person. There is a strange pagan quality in her nature. I realise it to the full although it is so foreign to me. It is one of her greatest attractions." He flushed again quickly, stammered, smiled uncertainly.

I found his embarrassment unpleasant.

"And you," I asked him, "have you taken to hunting too?"

"I?" He laughed out at that. "Oh no, I ride nothing more dangerous than my bicycle."

I mumbled something about that being a pity. He took me up quickly.

"Yes, yes, it is. I wanted to do everything with her, everything. I thought we would share every pursuit, but I find that is difficult. Things work out so differently. My mother and Priscilla and I, we each have our separate tasks. My mother has always looked after the parish. It seemed natural, inevitable, that she should go on doing what she had always done, and I found I could not be two things at once, the Vicar and the Squire, so Priscilla has taken on the running of the estate. She is the Lord of the Manor now, you know."

"I should think she'd be a very good one."

"She is. My bailiff has a very high opinion of her judgment, but of course this leaves her little time to help me. It is a pity. I had hoped she would collaborate with me in my work."

"In your book?"

"Yes; and my sermons."

"I am afraid that is not quite her line."

"You think she would find the work uncongenial?"

"Most decidedly."

I was startled to see him go pale at this and to hear him

mutter, "Yes, I'm afraid so. I'm afraid it would be impossible."

"If you mean that it would be impossible to turn Priscilla into an amanuensis you are right. She can't spell, you know." I was growing impatient.

He remained perfectly serious. "That is true," he replied thoughtfully, with a puzzled frown. "She has had almost no education. She likes games much better than books. She does not really like to read. In the evenings she sits doing nothing with her hands in her lap. My mother has tried to teach her to sew, to knit, but she only succeeds in getting her worsteds and cottons into confusion, and in pricking her finger repeatedly and losing her temper. So we have abandoned the effort. She sits and listens with her feet tucked up on the sofa while I read aloud or talk. I am afraid she does not always listen. Sometimes she falls asleep or breaks in in the middle of a sentence with some little bit of gossip or news from one of the farms. It is very curious. She seems to have no interest at all in spiritual things."

I couldn't help laughing. He smiled ruefully back at me.

"Yes, I see that it is funny, but it is serious too for me as well as for her. She was doubtful you know, but I was sure, I had faith."

At that I burst out, "What on earth are you talking about, young man?"

He pulled himself up. For a minute he stared at me, then bent his beautiful head and huddled himself together with a sort of cringing of his slender body.

"You are right," he murmured, "I should not, I cannot discuss——"

I made to turn back to the house. I was uneasy, slightly disgusted, but he sprang in front of me.

"Don't go, don't go!" he entreated. "You were right to stop me, but surely you do not, cannot misinterpret my talking to you. You see I am puzzled. You have always

known her, I only a little time. The other day she said she hadn't realised that marrying a parson was anything special. Several of her friends had married parsons, she said, and had gone on as usual. That was what she said. I hoped you would explain. I don't seem to understand her as easily as I do other people. The truth is that I care almost too much. All her words have an immense significance, and everything that she does is magnified." He broke off, twisted his hands together behind him, stared at the ground. "I feel that I am very dull and drab beside her, and fussy. I try not to be fussy. She is strong and I am weak, but that's all right, isn't it? She is doing me good. I am acquiring a new mentality. Being with her I am conscious of something daring and sprightly that enters into my rather melancholy nature. The other day she called the Bishop an old fool. I laughed. You see, she is curing me of being a prig."

Poor Simon! His eyes were like a child's. He had become again for a moment the rather pitiful youngster who would slip into his father's study when Edward and I were talking, with his copy books under his arm, and await nervously our approbation or censure.

I patted his shoulder. "Well, my boy, I congratulate you. She is a good girl, just let her alone, let her have her way with you."

I felt him stiffen under my hand.

"Hypocrisy," he muttered, "hypocrisy is the deadly danger to men of my calling. I endeavour to preach nothing, no single article of Christian doctrine which I cannot adopt literally as a rule of conduct for myself. Surely, surely, if one is honest, one must be able to convince another, to prove——"

"You mean you want to convince Priscilla? You think she doesn't believe in you?" I brought out in spite of myself, impatiently.

"No, not that, not precisely."

"Then what the devil do you mean?"

He swung away from me. I wanted to put an end to the conversation, but he began again hurriedly.

"She seems so complete, so untroubled, so unaware, and yet it is impossible that she should not respond, should not change. Impossible that she should stand out against the powerful claim, the beauty. I count on God."

"For what? What are you talking about?"

"To reconcile Priscilla's mind to my own, to Christ's."

At that I lost my temper. "Why, in God's name, Simon, do you gabble like this? Why can't you keep your feelings to yourself? Where's your decency?"

He broke in, "Ah, you are angry. You are shocked. You think it dreadful of me to blurt out all this, but you don't understand. You think me ——"

"I think you're a young fool."

"Do you? Do you? Perhaps I am. Perhaps. If only it were just that. But you see there is something immense, absolute, undeniable, that I cannot go back on."

I cut him short. "No one is asking you to go back on it. All we want you to do is to keep it to yourself." And this time I started for the house, determined to end the conversation.

Priscilla at that moment appeared at the end of the path. She advanced serenely between the gay flaunting borders. I heard Simon expelling his breath from his lungs in a long shuddering sigh of relief. An instant later he had hurried forward. They met, their four hands linked, and stood there a moment looking into each other's eyes. Then I saw Priscilla loosen a hand and lift it and smooth his cheek, very gently. Never had I seen her make such a gesture. Something new, something grave, something that could have been lasting, had come into her life with this poor, nerve-wrecked Simon who had appealed directly to her compassion.

There is an exquisite and terrible irony in this business. It appears that words, written formulas, have the power to wreck men's lives. Words are swords, banners for

armies, gunpowder to blow up dynasties, as well as traps and cages for men. Simon was a worshipper of words. The Word of God, as he called it, rang in his head day and night. It deafened him to the humble human noises of everyday life. His fiery devotion to Jesus Christ was not for these two the danger. Priscilla understood his ardour, she respected it. She had for Simon a feeling of awe as well as of compassion. And in turn she represented for Simon all that was dignified and normal. She, if anyone, could have made him into a man, into a balanced and reasonable human being, and he felt this, it was because of this he clung to her, and yet he couldn't give in to it, and the very essence of her charm which could have cured him of his illness came to seem to him to contain a poison. She had married him because he was "good." He had married her, and adored her, because he was weak and she was strong, but her strength baffled him and made him suspicious and he fought it and was resolved to break it down. He was jealous and he was reluctant, from the very beginning. In the innermost secret hidden place of his spirit he was afraid of the passion he felt for her. It interfered with his mystic life.

Had Priscilla responded to him with an emotion equal to his own, or had she given in to him and accepted his creed as her rule and pretended to understand the words that meant nothing to her, all might have been well with him, but she didn't. She remained herself, and gave him in return for his passion an affection that was no less profound for being different. He sensed at once the difference, and at once his jealousy began its work of insidious torment, and under the influence of that sickening pain he became ashamed of his love and horrified by it, for it was greedy and hungry and frenzied and it threatened the foundations of his belief. How could it not be so when his ideal was the life of angels and godlike men, a flight of the alone to the alone?

CHAPTER IV

THE young bloods of my day drank more port and less whisky than those of Crab Willing's generation, otherwise we were, I imagine, much the same. There was a little less emphasis on speed perhaps. We drove coaches instead of motor-cars, and knowing nothing of the exhilaration of flying through the heavens, were content to break our bones in the hunting field. Our world was smaller. That is to say the British Isles were bigger. We didn't cover so much of the map in our comings and goings, and obtained, I fancy, a sharper savour from the joys we cultivated at home. We drank, I would venture to boast, deeper of England. We quaffed in our coffee houses and music halls and friendly smoking rooms a richer liquor of pleasure. Insular gluttons of all that was English, a trip to Paris was flightiness. Our English beauties were peerless, the mutton chops at Simpson's better than any elaborate French messes, and the frosty nip in the air on a hunting morning dearer to our souls than any langorous zephyrs of the Mediterranean.

I can remember thinking it a very good effort to cross to Ireland in the packet for three days hunting. Dublin in those days was the set-off to London. The Horse Show there was one of the few events that lured us from Newmarket or Mayfair or the hidden gardens where our ladies in muttonleg sleeves and bustles awaited our ardours.

Nor would Crab have found them tame, these Victorian damsels, though a legend of faintings and forget-me-not bouquets has grown up, God knows how, round their mossy tombs.

I did not know Crab well in his young days. No one knew him, nobody that is to say in the county was his

intimate, and few people in the world. There was Peggy Sidlington, of course; it was taken for granted in the set they both frequented that she knew him better than anyone. The friendship dated from the time when he had been a subaltern in the 5th, a matter of twelve years or more when my story begins, and was generally accepted as a proof of Crab's flair for the very best always, and also of his remarkable way of getting and keeping what he wanted, for Peggy Sidlington was admitted to be not only one of the most entrancing creatures in England, but one of the most elusive. People who were puzzled by Crab, who had tried to make friends with him and had found themselves after months or even years of well-meant endeavour "no forrarder" would sigh or grunt and say, "Strange fellow that. Peggy likes him," which might mean that they were blessed to understand why she did, or that they admitted there must be something in him otherwise she wouldn't. He didn't, curiously enough, make enemies. Few men or women were made to feel sore. He didn't actually snub anyone. They could fasten on to no rebuff or rudeness. It was simply that the distance between themselves and the man who attracted so curiously their interest remained the same, and that his tranquillity continued unruffled.

It was as if he were unaware of their interest, unconscious of their efforts, almost unconscious, indeed, of their existence. Women, some women, turned on him at times, called him a deadly bore and complained that his good manners were unspeakably monotonous. They compared notes and found that he treated them all exactly alike. There were a dozen or so with whom he dined, danced, hunted. To these he sent roses at Christmas and lilies at Easter. Wherever he happened to be, India, South Africa, or London, the great oblong boxes arrived punctually with his card from Solomon's in Piccadilly. He had apparently a standing order there for these annual tributes. Occasionally a new name and address was

added to the list, none was ever dropped unless the lady herself disappeared. It took a thing as final as a funeral to interrupt Lord Willing's habits.

It became a joke with these ladies. They recovered, each one in turn, from their ill-temper. "He belongs to Peggy," they said; "he's a faithful old thing." No one grudged Peggy her beaux. It was impossible to be nasty about Peggy Sidlington. She had never been known to play a mean trick on anyone. Nor, for that matter, had she ever been "caught out" in any foolishness. No one could pin Peggy down. No one really knew what she was up to. She floated about through the dark roaring gaiety of their English life like a flower, her lovely face as innocent, her brow as calm, her eyes as candid as a child's. She might, they felt, be anything. She might be as good as gold, as utterly sweet as she looked, she might, on the other hand, be a deep well of duplicity. It was actually on the cards that there might be nothing, that is nothing definite, between her and Crab, or between her and any man. It was possible that she liked her comic little husband exclusively. In any case she kept him absurdly cheerful. "Peg this and Peg that. Peg says so and so. Peg's got more sense than any man I know." That was the way Sidlington went on.

The attitude of the "set" towards the affair of Peggy Sidlington and Crab Willing was characteristic. It can best be described as a blank refusal to see what was under their noses. There they were, going about together, to be seen all over the place, appearing simultaneously as if by miracle, in scattered country houses, on purple Scottish moors, in green English fields where hounds were running, turning up together by the same or different trains, in the same or separate motors, greeting each other casually, assuming a calm and friendly indifference, so completely sure of themselves and of each other as to have no need for explanations, and no one made any comment, showed any surprise or seemed in the least bit struck by the fact

that Crab's train from Edinburgh or Peggy's from Wales landed them both by some strange coincidence at an identical house in Leicestershire on a given Friday afternoon. A group of people, these, who liked looking straight at a thing and denying its existence.

They could deny the existence of anything, ugly or beautiful, it mattered little, if there was a point in doing it, and as regards Peg and Crab, there seemed to be for them a distinct point in maintaining such an attitude. If any clumsy outsider risked a remark on the subject, they simply stared. If a well-meaning intruder asked a question about the movements of one or the other, they really didn't know. Though they consistently asked both to their houses and arranged as a matter of course for a party never to include one without the other, they did so without emphasis and with expert matter-of-factness. The truth was that they shied off from the "affair" if affair there was. They gave the thing a wide berth. All crowded together as they were in their whirling, exhilarating circle of endless activity, they kept, mentally, their distance, and behaved as if the love affair were playing itself out in the moon.

This frame of mind included not only the doings of Peggy and Crab but of all their friends. They lived and let live. They knew how to mind their own business. They stood shoulder to shoulder and did not watch each other. They were bound together by the strongest of possible ties, amusement. There was between them the strong, satisfying bond of a community of interests. They all did the same things and were extremely active about it. They raced, they hunted, they played polo, they danced, they gambled, they shot lions in Africa and tigers in India and grouse in Scotland; they went aboard yachts at Southampton and stepped off them into continental casinos; they moved rapidly across fields, hills, mountains, seas, were constantly making the most complicated engagements over long-distance telephones, and

kept them. They resembled a pack of prize hounds, and they hunted pleasure across the face of the varied earth with an exquisite zest and an expert knowledge, following the scent with unerring precision, for they knew the country and understood the sport and could stand any amount of going, as only highly bred creatures can, and they were ready for anything.

The crime in their world was to let a pal down. They counted upon each other in scrapes. There was a kind of freemasonry about it, an understanding, tacit, never mentioned, completely taken for granted, that was as binding as an oath taken in a secret society. If any one of them sent out an S.O.S. call the others responded without delay and without question. It was not their habit to question each other, as I have said. Curiosity was considered bad taste. They didn't cultivate it. They were less curious than any people on earth. They knew what they wanted to know. They knew how to enjoy themselves. They had their responsibilities and obligations, their places and tenants to look after, their politics, their children to keep an eye on, but they took these things in their stride and didn't talk about them, and as far as the great wide world was concerned, all the great bulk of it which didn't immediately concern them, well they weren't interested. They had no time to bother about things or people they never saw and didn't understand. They disliked things and people they didn't understand. There were many of these. In the total mountain pile of human, of earthly activity, they held in their grasp a grain as big as a mustard seed. They didn't at all mind that. Why should they? Providence had given them the pick of the basket. The plums they had plucked were the finest.

Crab Willing and Peggy Sidlington were leaders in this beautiful, fleet, pleasure-hunting pack. When I say that nobody knew Crab, I of course mean that every one in his set had known him ever since he was born, and that

accepting him as one of themselves they knew no more about him than just the fact that he was one of them and did everything that they did, and did it extremely well. He had a dry, compressed, enduring energy that left most of them sitting. He seemed to be able to do without sleep or food or any of the usual forms of relaxation. He was never in a hurry and always there. Wherever the fun was, there was Crab, as cool as a cucumber, as unruffled as a new sheet of paper, as fresh as a daisy, his lean, red face, that always looked so perfectly groomed, set in a mask of blankness, and a faint gleam in his eye. No one had ever known him tired. No one had ever seen him lose his temper. When he was angry he spoke in soft, cool tones courteous words that were never forgotten.

He moved through the world so smoothly that the extreme rapidity with which he transported himself from one place to another, and the extraordinary thoroughness with which he entered into the immediate sport of the moment, would have perhaps passed unnoticed had he not left a wake of exhausted servants behind him in his going. His own particular valet, the marvellous Scrub, had found it impossible to keep up with the pace and had put it to him, and the result was that there were two now who were supposed to be one, Scrub the first and Scrub the second, for Crab was reasonable in his own peculiar way. "I won't have two valets with two names and two sets of tricks and fads," he had said to the patient Scrub, "but if you can find a double that will be exactly like you, and if you'll train him so that I shan't notice the difference, then I'll put up with the arrangement." And Scrub had done it. With the help of Scotland Yard—Scrub was resourceful—he had found a man with the same red hair, the same freckled face, the same patient, dogged eyes, and he had trained him, and between them with the guiding mind of Scrub the first planning carefully ahead, they looked after Crab.

"I shall be hunting with the Atherstone to-morrow."

"Yes, my lud."

"Telephone Bradley to meet me somewhere with the chestnut mare and have out the new grey as second horse. What's my train?"

"Seven-fifty, my lud, from Euston."

"Right. I'll change. Where shall I change?"

"Spenwich Towers is handy for the Wednesday country, my lud."

"Right. Telephone his lordship that I'll ask him for a bath and tea. I dine in town with the Admiral. Decorations. There'll be four guns at the Briary Bush for the week-end shoot. No ladies. See to that brandy, and tell Elkins if the fire smokes in the hall to put in an electric heater. That'll do Scrub."

And Scrub the first or the second, which one it was didn't matter, turned on the tap the next afternoon in the south wing of that hideous mansion, Spenwich Towers, in the Atherstone country, and received his master's muddy clothes into his efficient arms, while Scrub the second or first collected various objects in long cases and wicker baskets from various shops in London and betook himself to Briary Lodge, Newmarket, where he installed with his own hands an electric heater in preparation for the week-end guests.

It was all very well done. There was no hurry or scurry. Not the least remarkable thing about Crab was the ease with which he did the impossible and the efficiency and precision with which he planned the incredible. Since his homecoming from South Africa his life was as well-regulated as a bank clerk's. There was behind the elaborate variety of it a steel scaffolding, a beautifully ordered routine. The main supports of this edifice were built upon the division of the seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter; the general trend of his occupations followed the course of the calendar. There were a dozen important fixed dates, mostly to do with race meetings—Epsom, Ascot, Goodwood, Newmarket, the Grand National; none of these did he miss unless some sudden caprice whipped him off to a

distant jungle. The 11th of August saw him in Perthshire, the middle of November found him in a pink coat in the Midlands, Christmas he reserved for Jericho Sands. Every Boxing Day he spent with Tupper walking or riding round the estate, every second Monday after the New Year he took Violet his mother to a play in London and dined her at Claridges on the eve of her flitting abroad. In addition to these regular recurring fixtures he had other less rigid habits. He looked in, like as not, in August at Deauville, he liked to hunt the wild boar at Arcachon, he was fairly certain of seeing the Grand Prix at Auteuil and of making a night of it in Paris. Occasionally he floated on the breast of the Mediterranean in somebody's yacht, with Peggy beside him in a deck chair, long and white and fragile and languidly dreamily lazy, Peggy who moved as rapidly as himself in the same wide orbit and who remained as unruffled, and who made little jokes and lapsed into delicious, comfortable silences and whose tender, oval face was as serene as if she hadn't a thing in the world to do but dream.

Incidentally, he soldiered, and curiously enough he had the reputation of being good at his job. There were men in the War Office who had their eye on him. He was expected to go ahead, supposed to have brains, but nothing happened. He was too busy to bother about having brains or about what was expected of him. When war was mentioned there came that gleam in his eye, but he said nothing, and arranged, as far as anyone could judge, to be on leave most of the time.

I had watched Crab for twenty years or more with interest, most of the time from a distance, seeing him as it were by refraction in the dull, polished mirror of Tupper's inarticulate mind, and what I saw there had at times pleased and at other times annoyed me. I knew, of course, who better, the extremely elastic quality of family ties in such a clan as the Willings, I knew perfectly that it was a part of the system to give a boy any amount of rope.

I took, I felt, into quite sufficient consideration the peculiar circumstances, the accumulation of privilege and special right that is supposed to surround such a man as Crab, son and heir to such a man as Tupper. Nevertheless I did feel that Crab went too far, and I was annoyed with Violet and Tupper for allowing it. Had they no claim on him at all, that they left him so ridiculously free? Wasn't there in heaven's name any obligation involved in being an only son? Why the deuce didn't the boy see that Tupper, who would have cut out his tongue rather than say so, wanted him at home occasionally, that indeed he, Crab, was perhaps the only thing on God's earth that Tupper did want, and represented in himself the unique, with the exception of his orchids and hydrangeas and lilies, the solitary source of pleasure in Tupper's life?

They were extraordinary, these two, this father and son. They seemed to have nothing to say to each other. After an absence of months Crab would come home for a day or two, would walk into his father's study, Tupper and he would make sounds, glance at each other gravely, and stand side by side in front of the fire, heads back, hands in their pockets, pipes in their mouths, staring at nothing through narrowed eyelids, as ridiculously alike as a couple of prize setters. It wasn't that their faces were so much alike. There they differed considerably. Crab was of the type, but had changed it. I say he, because as a child he had given promise of being an exact replica of Tupper, and it was obvious to me that it was he himself who had by some curious, perhaps unconscious, working of his will broken away and had made his face, like his life, different.

His face was stiffer and harder than Tupper's, his jaw more pronounced, his forehead had a vertical line down between the eyebrows. He was red, like his father, with smooth sandy hair and tawny eyes, but under his close-clipped moustache his lips were firm and showed only when he laughed a flash of brilliant white. His teeth were beautiful, like Violet's. Violet had given him, somehow,

something of her style. There was about him, not in him physically but existing somewhere, lurking in his being, usually hidden, a beauty that flashed now and then like a steel blade catching the light. It showed occasionally when he suddenly moved quickly or laughed aloud throwing back his small, neat, arrogant head. He was the first of the Willings for many a generation who had deliberately and ruthlessly enjoyed himself. Contrasted with Tupper his youth had been as different as lightning from a drizzle of rain. All the things that Tupper had never done and now did not want to do, or know how to do, he had done. Tupper had been conscientious, plodding, quiet, lonely. Crab had been careless, dashing, fast, ubiquitous, and yet the funny thing was that he had with all this, in the middle of all this, kept the quality that was Tupper's. In the midst of his noisy whirl, something of the cold, shy grandeur, something of the sublime intolerance, something of the ineffable indifference still clung to him.

A casual observer would have gathered from the behaviour of the two that they cared little for each other. They seemed in each other's company to be suffering the last extremity of boredom. One would come on them, each in an armchair, long legs stretched out, heads invisible behind newspapers, spirals of smoke curling lazily up to the high, gloomy ceiling, and not a word would they exchange during the Sunday morning hour between breakfast and church. Not a sound would be heard in that heavy, somnolent room save the flutter of the fire, the tapping of a pipe on the hearth and the patter of the rain on the tall blank panes of glass. And at last Crab would lift his long length out of his chair, shake himself gently in his shabby, comfortable clothes and say—"I'm off after lunch, Dad, promised to dine in town." And Tupper would grunt in acquiescence though likely as not he had been looking forward all day, for many days perhaps, to taking Crab out to the garden or the greenhouses, and had been carefully controlling his growing excitement as the moment approached when he

would show Crab his latest triumph, a new lily perhaps, the miraculous flower of the last packet of seeds brought back from Chinese Turkistan—he secretly financed botanical expeditions to that country and to the Pamirs—or some snaky, spotted orchid whose exotic and monstrous delicacy ravished his dry old senses. Certainly some rare blossom, some lovely tinted bell or cup was waiting on its slender stalk, was ready, had reached the perfection of its beauty, was being jealously guarded against Crab's visit. The gardener was at hand lurking round the corner; Tupper had probably been out half a dozen times since the day before to inspect the treasure, his heart fluttering under his ribs at the thought of sharing with Crab the voluptuous joy of his triumph, but when his hopes were dashed, he said nothing, the only sign of his disappointment a dull flush that rose in his cheeks as if he were ashamed of his silliness, and he would stiffly bid Crab good-bye, standing high and vague and indifferent at the top of the steps to watch the young man drive away. Nor did he ever ask Crab what he did with himself and the ample income he allowed him. If Tupper knew, and he undoubtedly did know, about Peggy Sidlington, he maintained a complete silence on the subject, and when she came down as she did sometimes, on the rare occasions when the house was thrown open for some festivity, he received her as he received each and every lady who entered his door, with his usual shy and distant and formal courtesy. And if Tupper blamed her, if he felt that she was responsible for Crab's not marrying, he gave no sign, either to Peggy herself or to anyone, and if he ever did discuss with Violet the important question of Crab's finding himself a wife, Violet was as reticent on the subject as himself.

Her relationship with her son was peculiar too in its way, but Violet wasn't shy, and Violet didn't care, not half so much as Tupper. She wasn't lonely. She didn't hide a timid, hurting ache, a weakening, wearying longing that she was ashamed of. She wasn't stopped on the verge of some

ridiculous and awkward display of feeling and left mumbling little, dry, meaningless words while she swallowed painfully those that she dared not utter. She knew exactly how to treat Crab, of whom she was extremely proud, and delightfully, adequately fond. She treated him as a man of the world, as one of her admirers, as a young blade whose comings and goings were in the midst of her other diversions one more especially pleasant, continued, recurring interest. Her manner to him was casual, flattering, amused, interested and discreetly lacking in inquisitiveness. Most of all it was flattering. She made herself very smart when he was about. She took long tramps with him and invited him to her boudoir and put on her most becoming *négligée* for his benefit. She paid him the compliment of expecting him to wait on her, to bring her a book from the library, to poke the fire, to open the window, to make out cheques in her cheque book. At dinner she conversed with him as if she were meeting again by some happy chance a young man who interested her enormously, and talked smoothly of their many mutual friends, of race meetings and polo matches, of the dulness of the last season in town, of the frivolity of Paris, the brutal gaiety of Berlin, the unattractiveness of the modern girl, and Crab of course played up to her. He took his cue from her and responded in kind, and while they played their pleasant game she watched him, submitting him to her shrewd, worldly scrutiny, summing up his points, reading between the lines, investigating the secrets of his heart and deciding that all was well, that Peggy Sidlington was doing him no harm, that in a word he would do, that he would do very well indeed. And all this time Tupper would be solemnly eating his dinner in silence and staring at the silver in the centre of the table with a blank, fixed gaze, with mild eyes that refused absolutely to give him away, to convey any sense of isolation, any desire to speak, any interest in the many topics on which they touched, with eyes that expressed, indeed, nothing, just nothing at all.

Suppose that he had expressed, for once, just once, what he thought of Crab's life, suppose that he had put into words his verdict of his son, his final, deepest feeling about the young man? What would he have said? I have often wondered, and I think I know. I suspect him of being secretly delighted with Crab for doing the very things that he himself had never had the "guts" to do. I suspect him of deriving a sardonic enjoyment, a bitter relish from the fact that Crab was avenging his own dreary youth and had broken away from the tyranny of his house. And of course he trusted Crab in the highest possible sense. He trusted his sense of proportion. He knew that all this gadding about did not matter and would not interfere with Crab's acceptance of his responsibilities when the time came. He counted on him absolutely to do what was expected of him, to take his place when he, Tupper, was gone, and to uphold the tradition of the family that represented for Tupper one of the foundation stones upon which England was built.

I can see them now, the three of them, Violet and Tupper and Crab, in that house of a couple of hundred rooms, where suites of bedrooms remained closed year in and year out, where flocks of aproned housemaids fluttered like white moths about dim, shuttered drawing-rooms and a herd of underlings clattered down miles of back stairs and stone-flagged corridors, three tall figures, ghostly they seem now, but solid for all that, and serene, sure of themselves and perfectly at home in a place that was planned to house comfortably the equerries and aides and ladies-in-waiting of royal visitors, accepting without question the appropriateness of the place, falling in line unconsciously with the idea that had produced it, an idea that was a statement of faith in their own significance, their own durability.

I see no shadow of doubt, no slightest gesture of uncertainty, nor any sign of impatience or of weighted shoulders, in any of the three. They stood erect and

tranquil. They shouldered the weight. They carried it with ease, grey Tupper, gentle and shy, Violet shining with a grand elastic grace, Crab straight and spare and keen, like the upright blade of a spear. Certainly Violet and Tupper had every reason to count on Crab. I mean that their instinct was right, that their confidence in him was well-founded, that as far as it is possible in this world to be safe, to be sure of anything, they had a right to feel safe with him. He was the last man in the world one would have picked out for the rôle he was fated to play. His faults, his ruthlessness, his arrogance, his fierce pursuit of pleasure were a guarantee against the very thing that happened to him.

And as Violet once said, "One would have thought that his affair with Peggy Sidlington would have made such a thing impossible. What could be safer for a man than a long, pleasant attachment to a sensible, humorous creature like Peggy?" I do not know, I know nothing. I cannot answer questions of that kind.

I am an old man now, a testy bachelor reputed to have a very difficult temper. I live alone like a badger in his hole. What do I know of that thing called love? I cannot remember the sweethearts of my youth. They are insipid ghosts, far too timid to beard me in the den of my old age. I cannot recall their faces or their voices or the perfume of their hair, which the poets tell me I should recall, or their lips. Did I ever kiss their lips? For the life of me I cannot remember ever having done such a thing. And now that Priscilla is gone I have no interest in the life beyond my garden. That remains to me and my books and my pipe. So how can I be expected to understand what it was that happened to Priscilla and Crab Willing? I could not explain it if I would. I can only relate what I saw, and what I saw was dignified and strange.

Child, child, I would relate it carefully, exactly, so that each word be true, for you I do it, Priscilla. You are there

somewhere in the shadow, out in the dark, perhaps, watching me, your brave little white face lifted. I saw it lifted to Crab that day in the park at Jericho Sands, that Christmas before the war. You were coming down the slope opposite the terrace, you stopped in full view of the house, and stood looking at each other. A wind was blowing, scattering the few last leaves from the oak trees. You stood out there in the wind under the grey, broken sky. There was something in the way you leaned back against the wind, your bright scarf floating out before you, little wisps of hair blown against your cheek as you lifted your head, and something in the way Crab looked down gravely into your face, that startled me.

Why, I do not know. There is so much that I do not know in regard to those two. Was it some premonition, some little secret tapping signal sent up out of the subconscious to warn me? Had I always known, prophetically? But how could I know? They had lived side by side without meeting. Fate had conspired to keep them apart. Actually, by an extraordinary series of flukes Crab had scarcely laid eyes on her since she was a child romping with his sisters. Then why, I ask myself, when I saw them together that Christmas Day, did I have that feeling of recognition, and why did I mutter to myself—"There we are," and turn away with a groan?

I am no believer in predestination, or any of that nonsense about our having no power to shape our own lives. I see the cosmos being made anew every day, never finished, always changing; its immense rounded volume moulded by a myriad fumbling hands. The world for me is like a gigantic snowball, rolled along by a multitude of tiny gnomes, ourselves. It may be that we know what we are doing. It may be not. But in any case we struggle, we strain, we sweat blood and weep tears, and somehow, slowly, clumsily, the thing moves.

What we mean by fate is, I suppose, some intricate, untraceable interaction of a million little individual actions

and efforts that form a moving web, a compelling power of direction.

Puss Featherstone was in this business what one might call an instrument of fate. It was her effort to land Crab herself that brought him into Priscilla's presence and so ruined her chances, had she ever had any. She had been working and scheming for a couple of years or more to get him away from Peggy Sidlington, and though she had not apparently made any headway in that quarter, had succeeded in insinuating herself into Vi's good graces. A clever minx. She had got herself asked down to that Christmas party, to put a little life into them, Vi said, and had with her customary cheek suggested that Priscilla and Simon should also be included. Simon, however, did not come. Priscilla wrote that he could not leave his church duties, that they were both very sorry. Violet would have done nothing more on that had not Puss said on arrival—"Do let me telephone and get Priscilla over for the Boxing Day shoot and dance. The darling has no sort of a time," and so it was arranged, and Priscilla came alone, driving herself over in her Ford car.

There were a lot of people in the house, a sprinkling of relations, Tupper's two girls with their husbands and babies, an aged aunt, a cousin or two, the usual group of old cronies who came every year, and of whom I was one, and a dozen or so of Crab's friends who came for the pheasants, among them the Sidlingtons. It was all very pleasant. There were the bellringers and carol singers, there was a Christmas tree for the children and a ball for the tenants. We all did as we liked. The guns were away early and any of the others who wished went out to join them for luncheon. Tupper's friends dozed through the evening in the smoking-room, knocked the billiard balls about and went to bed early. Crab's friends danced in the gallery and got up charades. Vi played bridge for penny points:

I look back on it all now, and see at the small end of the

funnel of my memory the picture of that winter evening at Jericho Sands. The great house is quiet, the warmth and movement inside it are not sufficient to change its aspect. It stands unmoved in the silent park. Its long, imposing façade is blank and grey. There is no sign on its surface of cheer or merrymaking. No laughing faces show at the many windows. No sound comes through the solid walls. The terrace is empty. The wind sweeps along it and scurries down the wide stone steps. A few tiny shrivelled leaves dance there. And inside the little candle flames on the Christmas tree shine dimly as through a haze. A rich dark brown haze hangs over it all, like a pleasant fog. The many glowing hearths are not sufficient to colour the rooms. They are like camp fires, ruddily shining in shadowy and mournful caverns. Figures are gathered round them, silent figures come out of the gloom into the light and disappear again. Old people sit about in niches, in corners, doing nothing, digesting their food. The children shout and squeal and scamper up and down the immense polished stairs. They are like mice and no bigger than mice. Their voices are small and shrill as the chirruping of crickets. They dodge about the legs of heavy adults who stand solid in front of the friendly blaze, planted there, rooted there like trees to the floor. The young men's faces are red from the day spent in the open air. Their speech is slow. They are sleepy. They are drugged with wind, lulled with port and brandy, with plum-pudding and turkey. Their limbs ache pleasantly, their skins tingle, their jaws open in wide, luxurious yawns. They seem scarcely to notice the lovely long-necked creatures who have sunk down about them, like beautiful tropical birds, and are brooding in their blue and crimson and golden plumage. The men are thinking of the small brown birds that winged up over the purple woods and dropped obediently at the neat, smart pop of pellets. The air in the big rooms is rich with the odour of evergreen and of burning logs, rich and still. The fire whispers. Voices murmur. A little laugh gurgles and

drops. Words drop quietly like pebbles into the stillness. Someone will presently suggest a game. Someone will start the gramophone. Someone will get lazily to his feet and slowly encircling someone else with his arm will move down the floor. They will all begin to move then. The lazy blood in their veins will begin to beat, they will be roused, but they don't really want to be. Their games and their dancing are not important. It is not for this that they are there. There is something else, something deep and final and absolute that keeps them there content, something that is beyond pleasure, that has a contempt for gaiety, that is far more important than laughter, something that has to do with the dark, damp parklands beyond the windows, with the impenetrable walls of the house, with the replete, discreet sighing of the wind and the regular, disciplined, inoffensive beating of the rain, something that binds the young and the old together, that makes them look and behave alike, some old inherited habit, some obstinate, persistent faith in the things they know, something that is in their bones, something that is grave and strong and dull and immensely satisfactory, entirely sufficient, something that is England.

It was here that Crab Willing and Priscilla Birch became aware of each other. I suppose one must put it that on that night they fell in love. It is the current phrase. I know no other. It explains nothing, no more can I.

Where did it come from, that little inextinguishable spark that was lighted in their hearts, jumping mischievously with fatal lightness from one to the other. Twin sparks, like twin candle flames, lit and burning invisibly there in the immense decorum of that proud somnolent room.

They made no sign. They did not sigh or tremble or make any tell-tale gestures. They seemed to have little to say to each other, and if there were anything strange in their behaviour it was that for most of the evening they kept apart. Crab danced with Peggy, his old love, and Puss,

who wanted to be his new. Priscilla avoided him. I found her in the library alone toward midnight, curled up on a couch, her face white above her scarlet frock, her elbow propped on the dark shabby velvet, her head in her hand.

As I entered from the smoking-room the heavy portières parted opposite me. It was Crab. He did not seem to notice me, but stood a moment looking across the dim lamplit space at the still figure, the fair head, then went away. Two or three times he appeared there in the doorway while I sat with her. At last he came in.

Priscilla went a shade whiter when she saw him standing in front of her.

"You are not dancing?" he asked.

"I am talking to Tweedle."

"I interrupt?"

"Oh, no."

He lit a cigarette, stood by the fire, turned to me "Strange, isn't it? I've not seen Priscilla since my coming of age. She had pigtails then. Do you remember? Used to run wild all over the place with the girls. Regular tomboys. Once she chopped a bit off her finger with an axe. That was before, even further back. Do you remember Priscilla?"

She smiled and lifted up her hand. The tip of the first finger was, as I saw in the lamplight, slightly misshapen.

"You were awfully plucky. You never said a word. It bled all up the garden walk, big red drops. I can see you now. You had on a blue frock, you smeared blood on it. Babs and Vi were in an awful state, but you chuckled. Come and dance, Tweedle won't mind. Let me have her, Tweedle, for a little while."

She rose. They stood side by side facing me, an uncommonly handsome couple they made too, much handsomer together than separate, I remember noticing that. There was something about each of them that matched the other, a length of limb, a high way of carrying the head, a stubborn

lift of the chin, some such thing. They looked down at me kindly, very kind and friendly and indulgent they were, smiling at me lazily, but through their lazy, smiling eyes, I caught a glimpse, suddenly, of their excitement. So fine and smooth and easy they looked, but their hearts were beating, I suppose, whipping up the rich blood in their veins.

"Come, Priscilla," Crab insisted.

"You don't mind, Tweedle?"

"I'm off to bed, my dear."

"Come, Priscilla."

He took her away. I saw them dancing as I went upstairs to bed half an hour later, her scarlet frock against his black coat at the far end of the hall. I looked down from the landing of the stairs. They were turning slowly, far away below me, under the high roof that is supported from the sides by winged lions. They had the great expanse of marble floor to themselves. The others were beyond in the gallery. The little tinkling jig that marked the rhythm of their steps strummed faintly in the distance beyond the confines of that wide, silent place, with its marble columns and high arches and domed ceiling.

She went back to Creech the next morning. She did not see Crab again until 1915. He did not come down to Jericho Sands at all that spring and summer before the war. He was seen about more than ever that season with Peggy Sidlington. It was Peggy who saw him off when the 5th left for the front, and Puss Featherstone who followed him to France in an ambulance corps. Priscilla stayed at home with Simon. She did not hear from him and he had no news of her.

CHAPTER V

THERE is a passage in Simon's Journal which I cannot allow to go to the printing press, which refers back to that summer before the war. It was in the month of June, 1914, that Priscilla lost her baby, and while she lay poised dangerously on the edge of death, still as a wax figure between the white sheets under the brocaded canopy of her beautiful bed, the doctors told Simon that if she lived she must never run the risk of having another child. Simon refers to this and gives a transcript of the marriage service of the Church of England.

" Dearly Beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony, which is an honourable estate instituted of God in the time of man's innocency signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church, which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of St. Paul to be honourable among all men: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised nor taken in hand unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained.

" First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord and to praise His Holy Name.

" Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift

of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body."

And Simon adds: "These words separated me from my wife Priscilla. I never again lived with her as her husband in the flesh."

I refrain from comment or any attempt to explain this matter. I suppress the following passages. What benefit can there be in analysing Simon's mind in this instance? No one ever knew of his decision save those two. It was a secret between them. I state the fact here, because it explains much that were otherwise difficult of explanation.

There may be some that sympathise with him. One would imagine from the rumpus raised in the press recently over the business of birth control that the country swarmed with them. In any case there it is. While the Featherstone girl and I sat helplessly in the garden waiting for Priscilla to come back to us from the eerie region that is between life and death, while Milly fluttered and fussed and held long whispered colloquies with condoling visitors in the outer hall, and Agatha, suddenly grand, all her humble awkwardness slipped from her, sat like a statue outside the door of her child's room, motionless, hour after hour, her face a rigid mask, her rusty garments heavily still as if carved in stone, Simon shut up in his study fought out his fight with the Devil and relinquished his claim to the compassionate healing beauty of her body. The phrase is his own.

But Puss Featherstone, who knew Priscilla in a way that I could not, said when we were told that Priscilla would live but could never have a baby save at the risk of her life, "Well, what will she do now? It was the one thing she cared about. God, what a mess everything is." And sitting on her feet on the ground she suddenly covered her funny Chinese face with her hands. She talked a great deal that day, did this strange young woman. She appeared to be in a raging fury with fate, with her friends, with herself.

with what she referred to as the ghastly joke of being alive. "We're a pretty hopeless lot, you know, Tweedle," she snarled. "God, how we go on. But then, we didn't ask to be born, did we? It's not our fault, is it, if we are here? There's Molly now, a dirty little slut you'd say, if you knew what I know, but she's got a kind heart really, only she's a maniac. Men, you know, always new ones. She must have 'em. The messes she gets into—waking up in strange men's flats, jewels gone, clothes in a state. She's my darling intimate friend. Calls me up on the 'phone to come and get her out of trouble. What's the good of preaching? She can't help it. None of us can help what we are, can we? I'm lucky. I never get drunk, but then I've no money, and I'm a maniac too, mad for excitement, you know." She pounded on the ground, "I cannot bear to be bored, I tell you, so what's to be done? What would you do? Not a bob to bless yourself with, and everything costing hundreds. Earn my living? I can't do the simplest sums. No one ever thought of giving me an education. What's the good of bothering? One's self-respect? That's all twaddle. I'd rather have a good time. Prigs make me sick, and immaculate misses angling for husbands. I'm a hunter. I go for what I want and get it, then perhaps I don't want it, but how can one tell beforehand?" She grinned miserably. Her tilted eyes narrowed to slits. "Anyhow, we're natural. We do what we please, and if we don't snivel, who's to blame us? We're a shameless lot, but we take what's coming to us, and most of it, believe me Tweedle, is bad. That's the joke. It's all rotten really. There aren't many days when one feels clean." She mused awhile, her neat head bent on her long throat, sitting on her feet, oriental fashion, the sunshine pouring over her smoothness like golden water.

"But Priscilla's different," she announced presently. "There's nothing placid or smug about Priscilla. She could be as mad as anyone, but she's proud. God, how proud she is. And then there's another thing, a streak in

her, so funny, bless her heart ; she likes little helpless things. Babies and puppies. That's what makes her fond of Simon. Well, he'll be her only child now. I wonder what — ? Anyhow, it's a damned shame."

I saw Priscilla once before going up to town for my mild little London season of six weeks hobnobbing with old friends. She looked like a very pale and ethereal boy, with her cropped head resting on the pillows that were not much whiter than her face. Her two terriers were curled up on the rosy counterpane. A great cluster of arum lilies stood on the table in the window. " Lord Moone sent me those," she said. " Wasn't it sweet of him. Is the garden looking lovely ? Simon says so, but I'm not sure he knows. Poor Simon, I make him go to the stable every morning with sugar, but he doesn't really like taking messages for me to Spanker and Lizzie and my darling Dolphin." She smiled. " Spillikins has had a fine litter. Did you know ? Such ducks of puppies they are. Brown brought them up to show me. He smelt so awfully of the stable they wouldn't let him come close, but I liked it." She gave her little chuckle.

When she was about and beginning to be herself again, but with the blue smudges under her eyes dark and deeply dented like little bruises in her pale face, and her strong voice husky and dragging for tiredness, the war came.

No one noticed Simon during those first disordered weeks. I was caught in town on the second of August, and stayed there, a victim, like all the other old men I knew, of the national hysteria. One looks back upon it all with amazement. I see myself waving my stick, lifting my top-hat and cheering with purple face the stolid youngsters who marched through the streets in khaki. I see myself hurrying through the night on the fourth of August, possessed of a wild and savage demon, in the company of a million others, shadowy beings, similarly possessed, to the gates of Buckingham Palace, and there I became an indistinguishable and inseparable part of the monstrous, quaking,

exultant mass of brawn and bone and hot blood and tingling flesh that waited under the pale ineffectual stars and saw the incredibly small form of His Majesty the King lifted above the mob, and felt the heart of the monster crowd break in my own bosom, and going straight to old X at the War Office next day, was taken on as a special favour in spite of my sixty years, in the Military Intelligence to decipher codes.

Tupper remained at Jericho Sands. He had raised two battalions of Territorials by the end of September, and was stumping the countryside making speeches in schoolhouses and pubs and village squares with the Union Jack flying from the bonnet of his car. This Violet told me when we lunched with Crab at his Club, two days before he went out. She had come up to help him do his shopping, but would go down again to Jericho Sands as soon as he had gone. She was organising St. Johns Ambulance centres throughout the county, and was roping in all the young women to help. She intended writing, she said, to Priscilla Birch.

Crab said, "How is she?" and, "Have some of this apple-tart, mother, it's not at all bad."

I said Priscilla had been very ill but was about again.

Violet said, "Oh, yes, Crab, I forgot to tell you. She nearly died. If it hadn't been for that Featherstone girl I expect she would have. Isn't that so, Bill? They all lost their heads, you know. Agatha would, such a fool, poor dear. It was Puss who sent for Sir Barclay. He got there just in time."

"You mean—they operated?" asked Crab in a peculiar voice.

"Yes, took away the baby, you know."

"Good God!"

The room was full of men in uniform lunching with their mothers and wives for the last time.

Violet began pulling on her gloves. "Agatha's mad," she said to me brightly. "She's living in Exminster over a drapers' and holding prayer meetings at the training

camp—I met her on her bicycle in the High Street—she's much too big and vague to ride a bicycle. But, Crab, how queer you look!—are you ill?”

“What's that? Ill? No, no, not at all.”

He straightened himself with a jerk. For a minute he had hung over the table, his long back bent, as if someone had given him a blow in the stomach.

“My poor dear, I hope you've not caught a chill,” said Vi lightly. “Did we put aspirin in your medicine case? I can't remember.”

Crab came with me to the lift. “I'd like awfully to run down again before I leave,” he muttered drily. Strangely like Tupper he seemed then. Shy, that was it, I realised it afterwards. “Just to say good-bye, you know.”

“Well, can't you?”

“No, it's too late now. Father's coming up to-morrow, you know.”

He hesitated, lifted a hand to his moustache, seemed about to speak, changed his mind, said—“Hum, yes,” and wished me good-day. I stepped into the lift. “Say good-bye to them all down there for me,” he called out hurriedly as I shot out of sight. That was not, however, my last glimpse of him. Tupper fetched me to go to the train. “Bit of an ordeal, you know, these good-byes,” he muttered. “Vi's bearing up extraordinarily well, though. She would, of course.”

Victoria Station was a cavern of roaring gloom that day. A fog hung thick under the livid roof, over the long trains that crawled with men in khaki, red-faced, brawny, lusty men, all the young, ruddy, stalwart men of England it seemed. They shouted, they laughed, they waved bottles, they hung out of the carriage windows stretching clumsy arms to their women who staggered under the weight of heavy children, pale twisted faces of women, grotesque under cheap hats that were pushed away by the lingering, clumsy kisses taken desperately from their sobbing mouths.

There were four of us to see Crab off, Vi, Tupper, Peggy

Sidlington and I. Crab was smooth, bland, elegant, but rather fussy about his kit and curt with the red-headed Scrub who was going along as his batman. His British Warm was perfectly cut, his boots had a wonderful polish. He made little jokes and laughed with a flash of his beautiful teeth.

"Be sure and let me know, sir, how the clivia turns out," was the last thing he said to Tupper.

Strange, the lovely, pale-flame, bell-like blossoms on their thick, smooth stems summoned by his words to flower there for an instant in the enormous mirk of that place of grinding wheels and snorting engines where so many hearts were breaking.

Vi and Tupper stood motionless as the train pulled out. Vi's face was rigid, no sign on it except the appearance of two sharp lines down from her nose to the corners of her mouth. Peggy's lovely eyes were swimming, but she, too, was still.

"Good-bye, Peg," Crab had said, and she had answered, "Good-bye, dear," shaking hands. He had kissed Vi once. She had not clung to him, even to his arm. She and Tupper strode swiftly away when the train was gone.

I put Peggy into her car. She was like an orchid, I thought, as she lay back long and languid in her cushions.

"I'm going into Guy's Hospital to-morrow," she said, "so I can't ask you to lunch or anything," and then—"Give Priscilla Birch my love, if you see her. Perhaps she'll look me up some day. Crab thinks I'd like her, and I'm sure I should." She rolled away.

So it was Priscilla whom he had meant after all, and to whom he had wanted to say good-bye. But in that case, if he cared as much as that, why had he never come down again to Jericho Sands after that Christmas party, and why, in the name of Heaven, talk to Peggy about her, and what exactly was this feeling of his for Peggy, who of all his friends was the only one who had the right to come with Vi and Tupper to see him off to the war?

It didn't at the time seem to make sense. I'm not sure that it does now, but I have puzzled it out, and I think I do in some measure understand. It is only interesting, of course, in view of what happened later, and it is in the light of after events that I have looked for the explanation, that has to do finally with what I am obliged to call the subtlety of such a nature as Crab's.

A curious word to use in describing an Englishman of so unemotional a type as Lord Willing. I know that. I realise as well as anyone the monotony of his smooth elegance, the stiffness of his immaculate surface, the gloss, the sheen, the neatness of boots, of hair, of clothes, all perfectly standardised and beautifully cut to the pattern of his class. His breeches were good, his legs were better, the cut of his face matched the cut of his hair, and he moved lazily down Sackville Street in a way to ravish the eye of his worshipful tailor. He had the stamp certainly. No one could mistake him for anything but what he was. He was the product of a class that for many leisured centuries had been breeding to produce a fine flower. All the same I stick to my point.

We are not supposed by foreigners to be a subtle people. Well, they are wrong, and quite naturally so. We don't at all blame them for not understanding us. We look too successfully what we are not to do anything but deceive outsiders, and this is in a way our object. We do not want to be understood. Our idea is to present to the world a passably decent exterior that has as little resemblance as possible to the self within. Perfidious Albion. We snap our fingers. We know that we are hiding poetry inside our beefy chests. It is a great satisfaction thus by virtue of our oxen appearance to avoid the unpleasant sense of exposure to prying curiosity.

In this crowded island of ours privacy has become the greatest of all luxuries. We cling to it as to the most cherished of possessions and are willing to be for ever misunderstood if only we can be left alone. We bury ourselves

and our treasures in our deep old homes in the country and prefer to suffer an extremity of financial embarrassment rather than relinquish an acre of the land that is the bulwark of our seclusion. The thing that is hidden has in our eyes an esoteric, an absolute value. A faint smirch appears on the object, however fine, that is exposed to the public view, be it a family portrait or a line of poetry. A part of its virtue goes out of it. We are shy epicures who savour best in solitude. So with our more serious prejudices, hopes and beliefs. Jealously we lock them inside us. The man who talks too much is an object of suspicion. We do not mind a gruff and terse brutality, but a well-meant loquacity makes us uneasy. We loathe the facile egotist who displays his sentiments or analyses his emotions and are dismayed by the sympathetic friend who tries to draw us out. So for protection and the decent enjoyment of our seclusion we have built up a public façade. We go in for pomp and ceremony. We have elaborated a grand array of appearances. Our ladies wear feathers at Court, our men swashbuckle about in scarlet and gold lace, our statesmen make speeches in Parliament in the fine, rolling periods of Gibbon or the English Bible, but presto, once our duty done, quick as a wink we jump down off the Woolsack, step out of Downing Street, take off our fine clothes, slip into worn, disreputable rags and are off to see the first cherry blossoms in Worcestershire, to hear the thrush sing in Devon, or watch the lambs gambolling on Sussex Downs.

Our country has taught us to be as we are. 'Tis a shy, elusive landscape, misty and soft and green, showing itself modestly, wreathed often in mysterious veils of pearly haze and silver rain. Seldom does the horizon open wide. The sun is reluctant, capricious, keeps us waiting, rarely appears in splendour, and on the wind comes to us, wherever we are, in the South, in the North, in the Midlands, the salt smell of the sea, a reminder of the vast eternally rolling deep that surrounds our shores.

In such a country it is natural that personality should develop slowly, that the young men should be all alike, and the old men of a striking diversity.

Crab Willing had been very adequately fashioned by our system to represent his class. The public school and the army had made of him a work of art, one of those works of art that they turn out by thousands. He resembled all the men of his world, his only difference being that he was rather a better example than most, and he had accepted as an article of faith that it was his duty to carry on what was begun and to stick closely to the formal type. Any variation from it would not be good form. Any inclination that was at variance with it was an inclination to be repressed. Where his desires and his interests fitted in with the undefined but perfectly definite scheme of permitted and accepted things, there he was quick to act upon and ruthless in the obtaining of his wish, but where he was warned by some secret, delicate instinct that what he wanted was extraordinary and unusual, there he drew back, hesitated, denied himself, or if the pressure of his craving was too great, acted secretly to obtain his end. Englishmen are full of these little secret, repressed likings, tastes of which they are ashamed, fancies that, like a talent for doing needlework, perhaps because they would be dubbed effeminate, they have never dared to indulge. Such was Crab's feeling for flowers, which he shared with Tupper for all his apparent indifference. He could not confess to it openly, not, at any rate, so long as he was in the army. Perhaps when he retired and settled down he would do so. And I believe now that his first feeling for Priscilla frightened him in just some such way. There was some quality in the emotion he had felt when he met her that winter's day at Jericho Sands that warned him of danger. It was new. It may have been made up of such strange things as tenderness and shy, childish faith. It had, perhaps, the mysterious frail quality of a dream or a whiff of the uncanny. He was drawn to her, it may be, as

he was drawn to the flowers of which he was so delicately and wildly enamoured. Something of that kind. Poetry was in it, the poetry of green English fields and misty skies. His instinct sounded the alarm. He shied off. He ran away. He dissembled.

The influence of habit came to his aid. He and Peggy had long been friends. Their relationship had the strength of habit. He turned back to her with relief, with a feeling of safety, of escape. He was with her more that summer than he had been since the first year of their love affair. It was the final flare of a flame that was dying out. He left England her lover, he came back her friend. His passion for her sloughed off him with the rest of his rich, elaborate life, while the image of Priscilla remained in his mind clean cut and solid as some exquisite carving or golden sacred icon. Tired to death, out there in a field of quaking mud, he thought of her.

In December I had a letter from Tupper, who wrote that the Bishop, a very sound man, was having some trouble with the Vicar of Creech, the one who had married Agatha's girl. He, Tupper, had been told that Birch was preaching against the war, and was using his influence to discourage the young men of the parish from enlisting. He didn't believe all this tittle-tattle, but he did know that the young ass had objected to his parish hall being used for war work. Vi had been extremely annoyed. The Bishop had naturally enough backed her up. One couldn't, of course, tolerate that sort of thing. A Labour man had come down, turned out to be some sort of Jew with a foreign name, and was stirring up trouble amongst the colliers. One could lock him up if he went too far, but it was awkward with a parson—. He wrote to me knowing that I was a friend of the family's. Perhaps I could do something.

About the same time I heard from Mrs. Pinch, my housekeeper. She told me that there had been a very hard frost, that she couldn't get any one to work in the garden, and that the Vicar was turned very peculiar and

was setting all the tongues in the village wagging with his queer ways and goings on. "There's many as is shocked," she wrote, "and there's some as say he's gone wrong in the head, but old Mrs. Green, she sticks up for him and says it's the truth he's speaking, and why should she send her five sons to the war to be killed just to please Lord Kitchener, which I'm sure is not a proper sentiment for an English widow woman whose dead husband was a clerk in the mayor's office at Exminster for twenty year."

I had noticed long before the outbreak of war a certain lack of sympathy on the part of our villagers for Simon. They were good enough folk on the whole, but thoroughly spoiled. For generations they had been accustomed to depend upon the worldly protection of the Squire of Creech, and the moral ministrations of the Vicar. The merging of the two into one did not suit them at all. It appeared to them to diminish their importance. The dignity of the village suffered. The Farmers' Union did not know where to turn for a president, the local Council was uncomfortable with the Vicar in the chair, the publican, Bowles, who was chairman of the local Conservative Association, could not ask him to preside at a political meeting. And Simon, of course, was not interested in these things. They knew this and were offended. On the other hand, his sermons did not please them. He was too earnest and too eloquent. His impassioned appeals made them uncomfortable. They would sit stolidly through the service, then tramp as stolidly out and shake their heads dubiously as they stumped away home to their cottages and farms. There was a flavour about his language that reminded them of the chapel, and they despised the chapel people. Even the women tossed their heads and sniffed. Miss Maffit, the schoolmistress, and Miss Bailey, the milliner, were openly shocked at the bold, intimate way in which he alluded to Our Lord. Their virtuous modesty was outraged when he repeatedly informed them that their hearts were desperately wicked and their imaginations

unclean. Nor were these arch-snobs of our community melted by his patient and unsparing efforts to help the poor, the sick, the dissolute. He did not come to drink tea with them, so they looked with a cold eye on his struggles with the village drunkards and ne'er-do-wells; when they met him wearily pedalling home on his bicycle from some pitiful deathbed in some distant farmhouse their smiles of greeting were sour. It was only the unfortunate who loved him.

And so I read these letters with alarm and asked for twenty-four hours' leave on urgent private affairs and went down.

It didn't take me long to get the hang of the thing. I arrived at tea-time. Priscilla was out. Milly received me and before the tea-kettle had come to a boil began her mysterious, whispered confidences. "The Bishop," she hissed softly, her worn finger to her puckered lips, "the Bishop is in the study." Then she nodded her feeble, curly grey head twice and looked at me with frightened eyes. "Simon is very upset, oh, dreadfully. He hasn't slept for three nights and eats nothing." Her poor hands fluttered and fumbled among the teacups. "Let me see, two lumps, I think? I forget so nowadays. I'm afraid I've no cream, but I did have a stock of sugar. Simon says I shouldn't. He was very angry with me for laying in stores, though he does feel so strongly about the war. It's making him ill, you know. You'll see for yourself. Of course I know he's right, but I do wish—but I mustn't say that." She stopped miserably. I asked where Priscilla was, and surprised a sudden flare of vindictive spite in the pale, watery eyes. "I'm sure I couldn't say; she's off somewhere with Lady Moone, I fancy, organising work rooms. She and Simon don't agree, you know, about the war." There was a gleam now of satisfaction in her eyes, but quickly it faded. She began again to fidget. "The Bishop has been here nearly an hour. He sent for Simon to come to the Palace last week. I'm afraid Simon will

not be able to make him understand. What is your opinion of the Bishop? Would you call him stupid or not? I have always found him most difficult to talk to, but of course he is very highly respected, and I suppose if Simon—if—oh, what do you think is happening? It all seems so complicated—Simon has tried to explain it to me, but you see it was only the other day that the curate of St. Mary's at Suffron left after a dreadful scene to join the army. He enlisted, you know—you remember him, that big, red-faced young man. The Archbishop says they can go as chaplains, but not as soldiers—those who have taken Orders are not to fight, he says—but now the Bishop is upset the other way round. Simon says the difficulty is that to be a good Churchman is one thing and to be a good citizen another, and the Archbishop wants to reconcile the two. It's a compromise, he says—and Simon can't compromise, you know. He never does—but I'm afraid I don't understand."

She bent closer, her little head quivering, her hand clutched the tablecloth. "Do you," she whispered breathlessly, "do you think they would—turn Simon out—of the Church I mean?" A spasm twisted her features. I observed that she was shaking in all her dry little bones.

I felt very sorry for her. I said, "No, no, of course not," and heard Priscilla's strong young voice in the hall. "Mr. Tweedle here? How awfully jolly." The door opened. "Bill," she cried. "How wonderful!" But at the sight of us sitting there so close together alone, she seemed startled and asked quickly, "Where is Simon?"

"He's in his study."

"Has he had tea? I'll go."

"No, no, dear," wailed Milly. "Don't go, the Bishop's with him."

"Oh." Priscilla stiffened. She stood quite still, staring at me in silence, her eyes darkening in the curious way they had when she was hurt. Then presently she lifted her stubborn chin and smiled. "Tell us the news, Bill,"

she said. "When did you come down? How long can you stay? Have you lost your job at the War Office?"

I said I had got twenty-four hours' leave.

"Oh," said Priscilla, and then softly, "Why, Bill? Is there anything wrong?"

"No, dear, I just came down to see how you were getting on."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite, that is to say, Moone wrote me." I felt strangely embarrassed.

"I see." She frowned.

"He told me there was some trouble, that Simon——"

"Yes?" breathed Priscilla, dangerously gentle. Actually it was as if the girl were threatening me. I felt mortified and angry.

"Look here, my child. I came down to see Simon, to talk with him, to try to be of use."

"That's awfully good of you, Bill. Bunny, aren't you going to give me any tea?" And with that she turned her back on me. I could have laughed outright, but I was annoyed all the same. What right had she to treat me as if I were a vulgar busybody? It was poor Milly who came to my rescue and by making things worse made them better.

"How cross you are, Priscilla," she quavered. "Mr. Tweedle knows all about everything and is really most comforting. He says the Bishop wouldn't dream of turning Simon out of the Church."

The girl wheeled round, her face white, her square jaw set. "I should think not. Who dares suggest such a thing? Simon has done nothing that the Bishop has any right to object to. The Bishop is a humbug—they are all humbugs—all but Simon. He hates the war. He hates it more, much more than we do. He sees it differently, and he's honest. He has explained it all to me. He says he could not kill, so how can he persuade or help other men to do what he knows is wrong? He says you can't

love God and your fellow men and go out and slaughter them. I see perfectly what he means. It is all perfectly simple. If you feel like that, then you feel like that. All they have against him is that he's honest. Why can't they leave him alone?" Her voice dropped. Her anger was gone suddenly. "It's awfully hard for Simon just now, Bill," she said huskily. "You've no idea how hard it is. No one agrees with him. Not even Mummy. Not even me." She smiled sadly.

There was the sound of voices, of footsteps. A door opened and closed. Simon came in wearily. He was shockingly changed. His clothes were two sizes too big for him. Two red spots burned on his cheek-bones. His eyes were unnaturally bright. He smiled uncertainly, looked apprehensively from one of us to the other, then sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"I have capitulated," he gasped. "I have promised not to lift a finger ever again to stop this hellish business." He began to shake violently. Priscilla stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder, silently looking down. Milly began to cry.

At the sound of her whimpering he uncovered his face.

"Why do you cry, Mother?" he asked sternly. "Haven't I denied the truth to make you comfortable? To save you and Priscilla from disgrace? What have you to cry for now? I have bowed to the Bishop, do you hear? I have agreed that the Germans are not God's creatures, that we the English and our Allies are the chosen people. I have subscribed to the doctrine that we are fighting, not for cupidity and greed and the stupidity of half a dozen men in Whitehall, but for righteousness' sake, and I have set my seal to the most colossal piece of presumption of which the human mind is capable, namely the assertion that God is on our side. God is on our side, they say, and I am to pray to Him every day to give us the victory and help us wipe out the enemy. The Prince of Peace has a

sword in His Hands. He rips open the bellies of Germans, takes the milk out of the puling mouths of Austrian babies, and condemns a million souls to die unsaved."

He laughed. I thought as he tottered to his feet that he was mad. He seemed to read my thoughts.

"The world is mad," he cried, "and claps the few sane men into prison. Here and there in the country a lonely voice is lifted in protest and silenced in a storm of hisses. Ah, how I sympathise with those who can, who dare to object!"

He began to walk up and down the room twisting his hands together and talking rapidly in a tense, jabbering mutter, "Civilisation—A war to uphold civilisation—It will go under, they say, the whole ghastly fake, the whole great edifice of fornication and lust. We must fight to preserve it—our brothels must be protected, and our theatres and our palatial hotels where gluttons gorge, and our banks that house the fortunes of millionaires, and our slums, where millions of men and women sweat and die in grime. To save this monstrous monument of godlessness and injustice we must send out our manhood to do murder—Civilisation!" He wheeled by the window and faced us, "Let me tell you that God, as in the days of the Flood, has repented Himself of creating man and has decided to allow the race of men who peopled the earth to make an end of themselves. Jehovah the great God is angry. A million lives like a million candle flames are being snuffed out in the vast darkness of His anger, and no one can stop it, save the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, whom He sent into the world to save us, He alone can save us now. He alone can intercede, and He would, oh, He would do it, if only we called upon Him. I said this to the Bishop. If every man of God cried to our Lord Jesus with a great cry, demanding peace, the peace He promised, then it would be stopped, and we should be saved. 'Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you.' Those were His words. But men have forgotten them. No one seems to think of

Him. Deluded with lies, roused to a hideous excitement, they are bent upon their own damnation.

"And I must be still, while brass bands blare and Hell yawns and humanity goes down into it headlong.

"I who know that the heart of my Lord is breaking, I must keep quiet.

"I have promised to keep quiet."

He looked at us helplessly, his excitement spent, tears on his face.

"Love. Love," he whispered. "Love your enemies. Do good to them that hate you? Who will hear? No one. Blessed are the pure in heart. For whom have these words any meaning? For none. Not even for you, mother, or for you, Priscilla. There is no one, no one, who cares any more for the Lord Jesus."

He looked at us a moment, holding out his hands in silence, then said wearily, "All that I can do now is to preach the Gospel of love in a world that has adopted the religion of hate and try to bring comfort to those whose hearts are broken by reassuring them with lies."

He went weeping out of the room.

Priscilla watched him go.

When the door had closed after him she turned to me her stern, pale face.

"Now you understand, Bill," she said, "and he may be right. It may be all true, what he says, and he'll never have any relief from the truth of it, not even the relief of going out and getting killed for what may be a lie and a mistake as all the rest are doing."

I must make way for Simon now, and let him tell his own story. He begins his narrative with Crab Willing's return home on leave.

PART TWO
SIMON CONTINUES

CHAPTER I

THERE is no longer any relief for me in prayer. When I pray I do not see the face of God, I see Priscilla. She is obstinate. I mean that her image is obstinate. It will not change. In spite of everything, in spite of the fact that I know she is an adulteress I see her as I saw her in the beginning. My imagination betrays me. It lies. It forces her on me. It pushes her in front of me. She stands there, grave, strong, beautiful, and I know that she is ugly. If only I could see her as ugly, as ashamed, even for a moment, then perhaps I could find peace.

I have prayed so much that now the mere act of getting down on my knees seems to unhinge me. Instead of the exquisite relief I used to experience I feel my self-control going. My limbs twitch. I have a desire to tear my clothes, to beat my head against the foot of the bed. Once I did. I came out of a swoon, my collar torn, my face bleeding. That way, I know, lies madness.

Yet deprived of prayer I am very lonely. I am cut off from God and His Only Son, my Lord and Master. I love Him. Oh, how truly I mean that, with what fearful and sad sincerity I say it.

What have I done that is past forgiveness?

"For thy soul be not ashamed to tell the truth." I shall, whatever it costs me. I am determined to get at the truth of this.

Since I am sick with praying I turn to writing for relief, to the deliberate setting down of the facts of the case. I will argue it out, if possible, coldly and logically and impersonally, as if it were the problem of some other man.

Priscilla against God, Priscilla's will against the Will of God. Priscilla's dumb idea against the written Word

of God. That is my subject. Who could hesitate in his verdict? Who could doubt the issue or question the truth? Priscilla or God? I question it, I, I, Simon Birch, Vicar of Creech St. Michael's. Priscilla is my wife. She is still my wife. In spite of everything. It is written.

She looked when I married her like a Greek boy, a golden boy. There is a description of David in the Book of Kings that always makes me think of her. I can see Priscilla running, letting fly a stone from a sling and killing Goliath, a giant. But you can't kill God, not that way.

What have I said? Never mind, leave it. I will cross nothing out. I talk as she would talk. She affects me so much, my thoughts, my speech, even now, indeed, increasingly.

I am not sure that already I am not slightly unbalanced. The chairs and tables take on at times unnatural aspects. They posture in strange attitudes. Their outlines are unfamiliar. The door of Priscilla's room is bewitched. At night when I pass it with my lighted candle I see reflected in the dark polished panels a face that grimaces at me in a silly, sickening and sickly manner. Is it my own? Have I already the countenance of an idiot? How can I tell? My looking-glass no doubt lies to me. If Priscilla's face is a lie, why not my own?

The spiritual life has never been easy for me. It is hard. It is hard. It involves a sustained and vigilant discipline. I am a weak man, and naturally lazy. I have a great capacity for voluptuous enjoyment, no aptitude for holiness. My senses are greedy, so much so that I dared not indulge even my milder appetites. No one understood this. Had I told them that drousing in the garden or eating warm peaches from the sunny wall were dangerous temptations for me they would have laughed at me. Yet it is so. To see God one must fast. One must starve one's senses, exasperate them, one must be uncom-

fortable. Meditation upon divine things is impossible on a full stomach in an easy chair.

It was for this, to teach me this, that God condemned Priscilla to be childless.

At least, so I believed, so I still believe. I must. I cannot doubt now. I cannot have been wrong. How can I have been wrong? It is all written in His Holy Word.

And yet, a question, faint as the far-distant wail of some little lost animal, is trying to form itself in the dark immense loneliness of my mind. I cannot make out the sense of it. I only hear the sound. A fact, a truth perhaps it may be, a distinct, separately existing thing, seems to be trying to reach me. I am afraid.

I will go back to putting down the events of this matter, prosaically, as I remember them.

It was in the spring of 1916, when we had been married nearly four years, that Crab Willing, home on leave from France, rang up on the telephone from Jericho Sands.

The telephone at Creech is in the passage that leads to the pantry and servants' hall. The door of my study is opposite the door that gives on to this corridor.

I was reading the sixth chapter of the Book of Revelations that morning, and had come to verse 8:—

“And behold a pale horse: and his name that sat upon him was Death, and Hell followed with him, and power was given unto them over the fourth part of the Earth to kill with sword, and with hunger and with death.”

The *Times* lay beside my open Bible. A correspondent wrote exulting that Germany was feeling the pinch of the blockade. Children were dying of hunger there, he said. I was staring at these words when the telephone bell rang. For some reason I jumped up at the sound, perhaps merely because I seldom heard the telephone, never if the doors were kept closed. My own had been left ajar. I went to close it. Priscilla was crossing the hall. She

had evidently been gardening. She seemed in a great hurry. She was running. She left the passage door open behind her. Though she was hidden now from sight I could hear her voice distinctly. I stood listening in my doorway. "Hello. Yes, this is Priscilla Birch speaking." Then after a pause I heard her say: "Oh," as if she were suddenly out of breath. She did not speak again for a moment. The other person seemed to be talking. I pushed my door wider. I stood very still listening, with a strange sense of dread. I heard her give one of her low chuckles. "But, of course," she said. "When? To-day? For tea? Right. I am digging potatoes this afternoon. I'll tell Simon. We'd no idea you were back. At about five o'clock as a rule." She hung up the receiver.

I found myself in the middle of the hall. I remember standing there in the April sunshine that came in a silvery sheen through the low leaded windows. The air was fresh and sweet. A robin was strutting in a puddle before the garden door. There was a great twittering of birds outside. The swallows, I noticed, were at work on their nest under Priscilla's window. From the high road that bounded the garden came the sound of a fife and drum. Soldiers were continually passing that way from the training camp at Exminster to the gun-ranges on the hills that lay to the north.

I waited for Priscilla to come out to me in the hall. She did not come. Why? What was she doing there behind that door? I crossed the hall, for some inexplicable reason on tiptoe, and confronted her in the passage. She was standing beside the telephone leaning against the wall with her head thrown up and back in a very peculiar way. She was standing like that, motionless, staring up at the blank whitewashed wall opposite. The look on her face reminded me of something, I didn't know what. I had seen that look before. She looked, yes, scared, as if there was a ghost there. She gave a

start when she saw me. "Oh," she said again in that same breathless tone, the tone she had used into the telephone.

"What is the matter, Priscilla?"

"Matter?"

"Why are you standing there like that against the wall?"

"Standing here? I don't know. Was I?" She seemed bewildered.

"But of course you are. Don't you know where you are or what you are doing?"

"I was answering the telephone, Simon."

"I know that, I heard you." Did she hesitate an instant? I thought so.

"It was Crab Willing," she said.

Something clicked in my brain. It was like the click of the shutter of a camera. Actually, it was audible. I heard it, and immediately on top of this strange tiny mental disturbance I was conscious of a shooting pain in the back of my head, so sharp that my heart missed a beat, and I was aware at the same time of saying to myself: "Of course, that's it. Crab Willing. Jericho Sands. Christmas, two years ago." But I didn't know what I meant, what I was talking to myself about. Another part of my brain shut down as it were on the words and refused to take in their meaning. It was as if there were two consciousnesses both suddenly fully awake in my head, the one trying to tell me something, the other refusing to listen, and out of their painful confusion I heard myself loudly echoing Priscilla's words.

"Crab Willing?"

"Yes, he's back on leave, he is coming over to tea."

The deeper, the inner voice of my mind insisted; something, some palpable thing seemed to be pressing there inside me, fumbling at the closed door of my brain, pushing. It had something important to tell me, something of which I was frightened. It knew, it knew something

that I did not want to know. I wanted to silence it, to shove it down, back, out of the way. I wanted to listen to Priscilla, to find out from Priscilla that it was wrong, that it was making a silly mistake. I fastened my eyes on her face. I fixed my attention on her. I hooked it into her as one hooks a grappling iron so that one can heave oneself up a steep place.

"Coming to tea? Why? What has happened? Why should he come over to tea?"

"What do you mean, Simon?"

"He's never been to tea before." I pressed her.

"No."

"Then why should he come now?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't it strike you as strange?"

"I hadn't thought——" She was staring at me in a painful, puzzled way now, and I stared back into her eyes, my face close, standing in front of her so that she couldn't move. I was in a panic lest she shift her eyes. If she drew away from me, if she cringed, if she flushed, if her face wavered, then I knew that the unknown thing I dreaded would flash out at me. Desperately, I held her.

"Did you expect him?"

"Expect him?" she echoed.

"Did you know he was coming home on leave?"

"But, of course not. How could I? I don't know what you mean, Simon." She made a movement as if to twist her hands together. Ah—the tell-tale movement. The flicker of a dreadful suspicion flamed up, an instant, obscuring her face. I grabbed her hands.

I was on the point of shouting out at her that she was lying. I caught myself just in time. The touch of her strong hands brought me to my senses. The confusion in my head cleared away. I stared at her an instant longer, then made for the door.

She called after me as I recrossed the hall:

"Don't you want him to come, Simon?"

I didn't answer. I heard her coming after me.

"Simon, do tell me, please."

I had reached my own door. I didn't turn round.

"Simon?"

"Well?"

"Shall I telephone Crab not to come?"

"Certainly not, my dear. Let him come by all means."

I went into my study and shut the door and flung myself in my chair, sprawling over my desk, my head on my arms. She went out again into the garden. All the rest of the morning she worked out there. I hoped she would come in to me. I longed for her to come back. A dozen times I went to the window. Once I saw her going round the corner of the house with a wheelbarrow full of plants. She didn't look round. At twelve I heard her voice under the window. She was humming an air, a popular tune from some music hall, but by the time I got to the window she was vanishing down the path to the greenhouses.

At lunch time I found her on her knees by the summer house. "Look Simon, at my tulips. Bill sent me the bulbs from Holland." She seemed to have forgotten our scene of the morning. I had intended to ask her forgiveness and to get by doing so a new reassurance from her, but her equanimity made it impossible.

At luncheon she said to my mother, "Bunny, we must have a good tea. Crab Willing is coming over. He's sure to be hungry. Soldiers always are."

My mother was pleased. She began to talk of crumpets and muffins. She said there were a few forced strawberries ready and asked me if she should pick them, but of course, she added plaintively, there would be no cream to eat with them. I told her pettishly to do so. I almost lost my temper with her. It came over me with a wave of exasperation that the war was nothing more to her than a daily nuisance and annoyance because it deprived her of a number of table delicacies, and I remembered the words of Solomon—"For the corruptible body is a load upon

the soul and the earthly habitation presseth down the mind." I continued to myself the quotation, playing with the unpleasantly juicy bit of meat on my plate—"and hardly do we guess aright at the things that are upon the earth, but the things that are in Heaven who shall search out, and who shall know thy thought, except thou give wisdom and send Thy Holy Spirit from above?" As the soothing words sounded through my mind I forgot my poor mother, who was so excessively occupied with my material well-being and began to think of Priscilla, and to wonder whether I had been wise in giving Priscilla her own way during the four years of our married life.

It is very difficult to remember with exactitude after all these years my own state of mind at that time. I can recall what I did, and what I said, I can recall every look of Priscilla's that caused fear to flutter in my heart, and I can live again through special moments of great inner excitement, but the colour of my thoughts then has become confused in my memory with other thoughts, black with a deeper knowledge that came later, and the pain that I felt then has become a part of the whole volume of pain that has been accumulating in me, month after month, year after year, until it forms a solid, poisonous mass that fills me tight as a drum. I am like a festering bag of skin now, a kind of dry, distended gourd, filled with pain, filled to bursting, filled so full that I cannot contain another drop. I am like a monstrous abscess that cannot burst.

Those were the first drops of infection. Mild, almost harmless they seem now, those faint little sickening thuds of apprehension that fell soundlessly inside me at the mention of Crab Willing's name, like droppings from some obscene bird of ill omen. They were merely the forerunners of what was in store for me. They were not in themselves unbearable. I could ignore them by an effort of will, and I did so. I could reason with myself. I could almost wash them away by simply repeating Priscilla's name.

It is very important to me to be quite clear about this.

There is a point here that I must make perfectly plain. I was depressed and troubled by Priscilla's indifference to Christian doctrine, but of the honourableness of her character I had no shadow of doubt. I did really believe that Priscilla's soul was in danger, but I none the less adored her, and she herself was in no way involved, that is, inculpated, in this special business of my new sudden panic. I mean that no shadow of a suspicion of her loyalty crossed my mind. I mean that I was incapable of approaching her in my thoughts with anything but reverence, with anything less than absolute trust. She might be a heathen, she was all the same splendid, an adorable heathen. It was in some such way that I saw her, and I a priest, a follower of the Lord Jesus, was responsible for bringing her to Christ.

I had failed to make any impression upon her. But that worry, that anxiety, was quite separate from this new threat of danger. Something had startled me, something queer, weird, like a psychic message, like the ringing of a bell by an invisible spirit in a medium's séance, but it was not her doing, it had come from beyond her, and instead of blaming her, of accusing her, of being afraid of her, in this matter, it was the other way round. I counted upon her, and upon her alone, to reassure me, to tell me that all was well, and that the uncanny message of warning was a delusion. She alone could do it, and I expected her to do it, and when I joined her that afternoon for tea in the drawing-room there was nothing in my mind that she could have resented, of this I am sure. Indeed had she been able to look into my heart, I believe that she would have been touched by what she would have seen there.

In any case I went to join the little tea-party with the intention of making up to Priscilla for my disagreeable scene of the morning by being pleasant to Crab Willing, and this I did actually carry through, in spite of the fact that on the instant of entering the long dim room, where the shadows were deep round the fire and only the last

slanting evening rays touched a few rare objects with crimson light, I received full in the face a shock that was in its effect like the blinding glare of a flashlight. It was exactly as if some mischievous photographer had timed his business for the moment of my entrance. The experience was identical, though the room remained richly dim.

They were standing, Priscilla and Crab, on either side of the wide low fireplace, leaning each one an elbow on the shelf of the mantelpiece, not facing each other, but almost turning their backs to the room, and looking down into the blaze. He was in khaki and she in her farm clothes, breeches and a sort of coat that was like a page's doublet or tunic, a costume that my mother thought immodest, but that was very becoming to her. They did not notice my entrance. They did not seem to be talking. They stood perhaps two feet apart and were looking silently down, and as I took in the picture they made, I knew. I knew for the space of an instant, I do really believe it now, looking back, everything, and at the same time I knew that Priscilla did not know, that she was all unaware of what I already comprehended, and I remember among all the clamorous crowd of feelings that rushed in on me a welling up from what seemed to me to be the very depths of my heart, of a pure and lovely emotion that was chivalrous and tender. I wanted on that instant to protect Priscilla from the thing that I knew was going to happen. I saw her as innocent and helpless. I saw her as a gallant and slender youth standing calmly on the deck of a ship that was carrying her straight into the teeth of a storm. Almost I heard in the distance the rushing sound of the wind, the muffled roar, the boom of breakers. Yet the room was curiously still. The singing of the tea kettle was audible in the stillness, and the flutter of the fire. I remember as I stood there that the petals of a rose in a bowl on the table fell, scattering softly, soundlessly, down.

I became aware of the need for extreme caution. The two figures by the fire seemed to be suspended in space by

a hair. The thing that held them in place was as fragile, as fine, as a spider's thread. If it snapped—what would happen? I half expected the sound of my footsteps to send them headlong into each other's arms, or reeling back, which would have been much the same thing.

My mother's thin little voice sent up a piping wail through the stillness.

"Here's Simon at last, and I'm sure he's dreadfully in need of a nice cup of tea."

I had not seen her in her corner behind the tea table. I had thought the two figures by the fire were alone in the room. I had seen them for an instant, terribly alone, in a space much greater than this walled-in apartment that now at the sound of my mother's familiar lament closed solidly in round me, shutting out my strange vision. The chairs, the sofas, the glinting tea-things, the pleasant aroma of tea, of burning logs, of warm, drowsy roses, all these well-known, pleasant things crowded in to take the place of it. It was gone.

Priscilla turned. Her face in the firelight was beautiful. She smiled at me. She had the look of a pleased child who has received a present. "Simon, here is Crab. We've eaten all the muffins, I'm so sorry."

Crab and I shook hands. I was pleased to find that he was no handsomer than I had remembered him. He struck me as very stiff, very heavy, very stupid. I was glad of this. After a murmured greeting he hunched his shoulders, dug his hands into his pockets and stood with his back to the fire staring in front of him while I sipped my tea and Priscilla piled things that I did not want to eat on my plate.

"Lord Willing says the war isn't as bad as we think it is, Simon," said my mother.

Crab threw her a rapid, oblique glance. I waited to see him smile. He didn't. His face remained blank. He resumed his stolid stare at nothing.

"He says the German soldiers are quite nice men, quite like our own, you'll be glad to hear that I know, and that

they write jokes on bits of paper and toss them over into our trenches. Isn't that strange, Simon? And then the next day they will all be killing each other."

The man's tired face showed no hint of irritation as he turned it stiffly with a grave courtesy to my poor mother, who was trying to make conversation.

She purred up at him, her pretty grey head on one side, her eyes fluttering.

"And do tell me one thing," she said. "Are you ever frightened?"

"Oh, rather, always." His face was wooden, his eyes remained kind. I remember noticing that. Even when she added with a foolish little laugh:

"Fancy, well of course I suppose it is very terrible."

Priscilla intervened. "Crab doesn't much like talking about the war, Bunny," she said abruptly.

Her eyes swept me on their way back to him. I caught her look as it passed, swiftly, unseeing, across my face. It was dark and brilliant. It fastened on him. Now she was gazing at him, shamelessly, absorbed.

I too found myself horribly interested by the changes in his appearance. He appeared darker and browner than he had been, but there was a grey tinge spread over his face like dust. The skin of it was dry, like a dead skin, and wrinkled. The deep, rough lines round his eyes and mouth gave him a strained, painful look. His sharp lips were compressed under his short moustache. One felt they would twist if he relaxed, that his whole face would twist.

But underneath this uncomfortable tired mask there was something patient and stubborn. His eyes had always seemed to me cruel and arrogant, now they were dazed, almost humble. And in spite of his air of still remaining obstinately one of the great worldlings of the earth he reminded one curiously of a patient animal. He had become more primitive. What he had met with over there had reduced him, as it were, to his lowest terms. He

had become the bare bones of himself. Nothing remained of him but what was essentially his self. One felt that if he lost anything more he would crumble to pieces, cease to exist.

It was all very peculiar, my sitting there, I mean, and watching him with that acute sense of intolerable understanding. I hated him. I hated what he stood for, brute strength, obstinate pride of race, incredible human endurance and all the rest of it. Such men are the natural enemies of Christ. By their very existence they assume the grandeur of man, and in their arrogant stupidity dare to die alone, as they lived, godless, sufficient unto themselves.

I understood him. Every smallest thing about him talked to me, was expressive. I saw his hand shaking when he lit a cigarette, and knew that it had been steady when he stood, in the trenches, looking at his watch, waiting to go over the top. I observed that his heaviness was a sign of great exhaustion. He might, I felt, fall suddenly profoundly asleep where he stood, and drop unconscious in a great huddled heap on the hearthrug. Or he might all at once lose control, fling himself across the room, shout, scream. But he stood heavily quiet and did not look at Priscilla. I waited, I watched for the look. It was to Priscilla that he had hurried in his dark exhaustion, out of the maw of the war that had reduced him to the semblance of a weary beast. It was Priscilla whom he wanted now that everything that was not vital to him had dropped away, but he did not look at her.

I remembered with a pang how much Priscilla had wanted to go to the Front. She had given up going for my sake, feeling it impossible, I suppose, to leave me when everyone turned against me, and had thrown herself into all manner of war work at home. She had ploughed up some hundreds of acres of pasture and with a squad of land girls was growing turnips, beets, potatoes, and wheat. In the evenings she was down in the village at her ambulance centre, rolling

bandages, or off in her Ford van to help Lady Moone. She called it "doing her bit." Truly, she might well have gone, for all the understanding or sympathy she showed me. She had said—"We don't feel alike, Simon, so let us be kind to each other and not bother. I believe in you, you know, even if I don't agree, and I admire you for being so honest."

That was what she said, but I suspected her of despising me secretly.

The gulf that the war had fixed between us widened, it was widening minute by minute as we sat there. I saw Priscilla and Crab together on the far side of it, and I imagined that I must look to them did they notice me, a pathetic and futile figure, effeminate, a weakling. They were two splendid brutes.

I recalled my school days. Crab had been Head of the school and captain of the cricket eleven in my first year. It was I who had secretly worshipped him then. I was called Sissy. I was a ridiculous failure at games. I remember moments in my school life when I would have thrown over my last chance of heaven to have been captain of anything. Secretly I had despised boys like myself, sanctimonious bookworms. Often at night sitting by my student lamp I would throw my books on the floor and burst into angry tears, and I would wander out the next day to the playground with a raging headache to gaze with hungry, wistful eyes at Crab, the hero of that young, cruel world.

These memories came back to me that afternoon with extraordinary vividness, and with them the thought that had I been a success at school I would no doubt have missed salvation, an idea that curiously enough was not the strong consolation that it might have been.

I looked at Crab. It occurred to me that it was the loneliness of my sickly boyhood that had driven me into the Church, that it was in the bitterness of a childish disappointment that I had turned to God, and I felt again the throb

of the old envy, and tasted again the bitterness of the old disappointment.

I had had such feelings before. Priscilla had stirred them when I first knew her. I had been conscious when I was courting her of all that I had missed, of all that I was not. I had known above all that I was not her kind, and my imagination had conjured up before my eyes the kind of man I would have liked to be, the kind of man whom she would recognise instinctively as her mate. I saw him quite clearly and hated him and was humiliated by his contrast to myself, and was determined to get her away from him for my own.

My courtship had been a long duel with an unknown man, an invisible antagonist.

Now here he was in the flesh. I recognised him.

Priscilla did not know what had happened, but I knew.

CHAPTER II

PRISCILLA did not realise what had happened to her. I was egged on by some demon to tell her, and this in spite of the fact that I knew our safety depended upon her ignorance. She being happy was only aware of her happiness, while I being unhappy was made inquisitive by my fear and in a panic brought about the very thing that I was most afraid of. I kept repeating to myself—"Be careful. Say nothing. Her mind is asleep. Don't, whatever you do, wake her up." And I began at the same time to cross-question her. My fear of finding out was matched by my desire to know, to find out. Such curiosity is like an itching sore that one scratches. One hopes by making it worse to make it more bearable. Other feelings too came in to urge me on in this disastrous business. While I knew I was right in my diagnosis, I still hoped that I was wrong, and was looking to her for reassurance. I wanted her to deny the fact that I knew was undeniable. I wanted her to deny it, though I knew I wouldn't believe her if she did. I wanted her to lie to me. I imagined that I would find relief in the sound of words I knew were false. Also, finally, I wanted to chastise her, that is to torment her. She was making me suffer, and I wanted to make her suffer.

I did not, of course, admit this to myself at the time. I only admit it now because I am sick of making myself out a saint, and determined at last to be honest. The truth is there was nothing even decent about the way I behaved. I was abject, despicable.

That I could still go on praying as if I had some superior claim on the Almighty while I tortured Priscilla seems to me, now that I face it squarely, preposterous.

I say that I was abject. I mean by that that I was

cunning, that I tried to trap her, to trip her up, to get out of her what I wanted without letting her know what I was up to. I spoke of Crab Willing appreciatively. That evening I pretended to a feeling of sympathy for him. I said he looked done up, and watched her closely to see whether or not she changed colour, and was disappointed that she did not. She replied, "Yes, he did seem a bit groggy." Her absurd words annoyed me, her casual manner exasperated me. I pursued the subject suavely.

"Remarkable, the endurance such men have. Must have nerves of steel."

Priscilla said, "Hum, yes."

"Ha," I ejaculated to myself, "she's pretending indifference," and murmured—"You don't seem very much interested."

She looked her surprise. "I? But I am. I admire him awfully."

"Naturally, he's a hero." I stressed the word and waited. She said nothing.

My nerves got the better of me. "Don't you agree? Have you nothing to say about it?"

She looked at me wonderingly. "Of course I agree, Simon. I only—I mean I didn't know you admired that sort of thing."

"But you do," I urged.

"Yes."

"Then why not admit it."

"What do you mean, Simon?"

"I mean, why be so chary of praising him, so cautious?"

"I don't understand."

I realised that I was blundering badly. I tried to retrieve myself.

"I only mean, dear, that I quite understand your being awfully pleased to see Crab again after all this time."

She mused, staring at the toe of her slipper, and again found nothing to say. I opened a book. My eyes on the page I asked as casually as possible:

"Is he coming over again before he goes back?"

"Yes, if he can." My ears, exquisitely intent, detected hesitation in her tone, but I rejoined with equanimity, "That's nice," and did not look up.

She moved lazily, stretched her arms over her head, yawned.

"I think I'll go to bed, Simon."

"Do, dear."

"I must be down at the farm early. We've a ripping crop of potatoes. They'll fetch six pounds a ton. We're shipping them to town to-morrow."

I had learned nothing. I was getting nowhere with her. She had given me not the slightest satisfaction. Her equanimity enraged me. She was standing now, yawning deliciously and warming her back at the fire. Her face was flushed and childlike, her eyes drowsy, almost she seemed to purr.

"What happened at Jericho Sands?" I asked suddenly.

"What?" Her mouth fell open.

"What happened at Jericho Sands?"

"I don't know. When?"

"That Christmas two years ago."

"Nothing that I know of. What do you mean?"

She had stopped yawning now and had stiffened and was staring at me amazed. Her amazement warned me. "Stop, stop," I cried soundlessly to myself. "Don't say it. Don't." But the words spurted out.

"What happened between you and Crab Willing at Jericho Sands?"

A queer blue light seemed to suffuse itself over her face. At least that was as I saw it. I suppose it was only that she went suddenly very pale, queerly pale, while her eyes darkened as they had darkened that morning, as they always darkened when she was hurt. I saw the hurt with satisfaction; no, with horror; no, with both. Pitiful Priscilla, dumb, unable to speak, I was awaking her suddenly with a mean, a cowardly, a shameful suspicion. She couldn't

answer me. She couldn't take in what I was doing to her. She only knew that I was hurting her.

"Answer me, Priscilla."

"Answer?" she echoed.

"Yes, answer. Something happened. What?"

"Between me and Crab?"

"Yes."

Her head was high. It moved higher. She looked down at me gravely and spoke very distinctly.

"Nothing happened, Simon."

"You expect me to believe that?" She winced.

"I do indeed, Simon."

"In the face of what has occurred to-day?"

"To-day?"

"Of his coming here to-day, straight here, the minute he gets leave. How do you explain that?"

"I—I don't. I hadn't thought." She faltered.

"But you must have—weren't you surprised then?"

"No, that is I was surprised to know he'd come back."

"But not surprised to see him?"

"No."

"Not surprised that he wanted to see you?"

"No. Yes. Oh, I don't know. Simon, what is it that is troubling you?"

She wasn't the kind to twist her hands. They were clenched close to her sides. She looked like a soldier stood up against a wall to be shot. The grandeur in her youthful gravity stopped me then. Something there was in it sufficiently convincing to bring, for the moment anyway, the relief I had been tormenting her to get.

"You are sure nothing happened, Priscilla?" I repeated weakly.

"Quite sure."

"Very well, I believe you."

"Ah." Was it a sigh, a groan, a question? I don't know. A moment longer she stood there looking at me in silence, then turned and walked out of the room.

Two days later she informed me that Lady Moone had telephoned to say she would be very pleased if we would dine that night at Jericho Sands. She had refused.

"How extraordinary," I said.

"That I should refuse?"

"No, that she should ask us. She hasn't, you know, spoken to me of late."

Priscilla flushed. She knew as well as I did how Lady Moone regarded my attitude toward the war. There had been something resembling a scene between us over the parish hall. A frigidly polite note had thanked me when I gave in on the question. I had not seen her since. Though Priscilla went there constantly on ambulance business, we were never asked to a meal now, at Jericho Sands. It was clear that this dinner was entirely Crab's idea and that he had forced his mother to invite us.

Still, although I hated the thought of going, I hated still more not going. I was ashamed of myself. I bitterly regretted by that time the line I had taken about Crab. I realised what a fatal blunder it had been. Priscilla's manner had been very curious during the two days that had elapsed. I could not make her out, could not tell what she was thinking. It might be that she already despised me. She had said nothing, had not alluded by so much as a word to our painful talk. She had been even more silent than usual—but I had found her eyes fixed on me several times with a bewildered, puzzled expression. I longed to put myself right with her, to make her talk, to get some statement from her that would set my mind at rest. So now I urged her:

"But why did you refuse, Priscilla? Wouldn't you like to go? We never dine out now. It would be nice for you."

She seemed surprised. "I thought you wouldn't care to go, Simon."

"On the contrary. I should like to very much—that is if it gives you any pleasure, my dear. I shall have a chance, you see, of making things up with the Moones'. Crab must

know all about that little awkwardness," I said lightly.

"He's really doing me a good turn."

"I'm sorry, Simon—I thought——"

"You can still telephone and say that you find we can come after all."

She hesitated a moment, then shook her head. "No. I'd rather not," she said then, abruptly. There was a stubborn look in her face. Why suddenly stubborn? I pondered over that look. She seemed to have taken in that moment a decision of importance, a decision that had a deeper significance than was involved in the refusal of a dinner invitation. What was in her mind? I was very bothered.

I think I know now what it was. I believe that then, at that moment, she decided not to see Crab again. I had warned her. She scented danger. She was aware—but not yet involved. She could still draw back—and she did. That was the psychological moment, so harmless, so insignificant, it seemed. It slipped by me slyly. I did not recognise it. How could I recognise it? Priscilla had a bundle of grey flannel for hospital shirts in her arms. She was on her way to the village. She had stopped in the hall to tell me. How could I know the fatal import of that second? Had I left her alone then in her stubbornness, nothing more would have happened. Crab would have disappeared out of our lives. She was dismissing him as she looked at me. I spoiled it all in my effort to appear magnanimous, to pretend that I was not jealous. I wanted her to forgive me, to admire me. I wanted her confidence again. I wanted to wipe out the hurt I had done her.

"I didn't mean what I said the other day, Priscilla. Please think no more about it. I was jealous. I am sorry. I was jealous, not of you, but of Crab and what he is. I admire him as much as you do. I should feel very badly if I thought you weren't going to see him again."

"You mean that, Simon?"

"I do."

She smiled then. "Well, that's that," she said happily, and leaning over her bundle she kissed my cheek.

The following day she was away in her Ford. Coming into my study in the evening she said:

"I met Crab outside the post office in Exminster. His leave is up on Saturday. He goes to town to-morrow. He asked me to lunch with him in town on Friday. I said I would. I knew you wouldn't mind. You don't, do you?" I was taken unawares. I stammered—"No, of course not."

That night and Thursday night I went three or four times to her door with the intention of knocking, of waking her to ask her not to go, but each time I hesitated, turned away, crept miserably back with my candle to my room, to spend the rest of the night tossing about in bed and imploring God on my knees to keep her from going to London, and on Friday morning she went, looking very smart in her town clothes, and gaily kissing me good-bye.

That was an unspeakable day. My mother came to my study a dozen times.

"Are you writing, Simon?"

"Yes, dear."

"I don't mean to disturb you, but do you know whether Priscilla is coming down by the four-fifty or the five-thirty-five?"

"I don't know, Mother."

"I only wondered if she would be back for tea."

"I shouldn't think so."

"I suppose she had shopping to do."

"I suppose so."

"She was lunching with Lord Willing, you said?"

"Yes."

"I suppose Lady Moone will be there."

"I don't know, Mother."

"In my day young married women——"

"Please leave me, Mother," I interrupted, beside myself—but very soon she would be back.

"Is your fire burning nicely, Simon?"

"Yes, dear."

"I've just 'phoned Simpkins. He says that Priscilla ordered him to meet the six o'clock train."

"Oh."

"So she won't be back to tea after all."

"No."

"I suppose she'll have tea in town."

"I suppose so."

"Shall I bring yours in to you here, Simon?"

"I don't care for any tea, Mother."

"Oh, but you must have tea, Simon. You look so tired and ill."

"I'd rather not be disturbed, Mother."

At six o'clock or rather at a quarter past, she was back again—this time breathless.

"She hasn't come, Simon. She must have missed the train."

"Evidently."

"She should have left Waterloo at four-twenty. There's nothing now until seven. I wonder what can have happened?"

"What do you mean, Mother? Nothing has happened. She has taken the later train, that is all."

"But she ordered Simpkins."

"She changed her mind."

"You're not worried then, Simon?"

"No. No, of course not. Why should I be?"

"You look so strange, Simon, and you keep on walking up and down. I've been listening outside, you've scarcely been still five minutes all the afternoon."

"Mother—I beg of you—you know I can't bear——"

"Forgive me, Simon," she whimpered, "but I can't understand Priscilla. I simply can't understand her. One would think that knowing how nervous you are she would at least come back when she said she would."

I cut her short. My anger was, alas, food for her hungry curiosity. She went away to brood, to puzzle, to con-

jecture. Her resentment against Priscilla fed upon my own ill-concealed apprehension.

The evening found me exhausted, in a semi-hysterical state. It was all I could do not to spring on Priscilla like a maniac, when she came striding in at seven o'clock to my study. Ah, how lovely she looked. Did I imagine that I had never seen her like that before? Or was there really a difference. How can I tell?

I crouched in my chair, holding firmly the arms of it, afraid to let go. I was all for caution now. I couldn't, I saw, hurt her now. I could only hurt myself. For that hour at least she was immune. Nothing could harm her. She was as safe as if surrounded by an enchanted circle.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Delicious. We lunched at Claridges."

"Nice lunch?"

"Wonderful. Oysters. Mushroom souffle. Wild duck a l'orange, and an ice, all terribly good, and a bottle of champagne. That was almost vulgar."

"And then?"

"Then?"

"What did you do after lunch?"

"We fed the pelicans."

"Fed the pelicans?"

"Yes, in St. James's Park."

"All the afternoon?"

"Well, for some time. Then we had tea."

"On top of all that lunch?"

"Yes, at the Carlton. And then Crab took me to my train."

I found nothing to say. Strangely enough I believed her absolutely. I knew she was not lying, and I know it now. The curious thing is that I always knew really, all through the whole struggle, precisely what she was thinking, exactly what she was concealing, and could perfectly accurately measure the amount of truth she gave to me and the amount she reserved to herself. On that day she kept nothing back.

CHAPTER III

THE village of Creech is a snug little place. It lies in the pleasant valley of the Toone, along the bank of that lazy, reedy river. Wooded hills rise close behind it on the north, to the south a gentler slope dented by other shallow valleys rolls up in rounded meadows beyond wide green fields. Another stream, the Windrush, comes down that way. There is an old bridge a mile or so beyond the Manor of Creech St. Michael's where the two rivers join. Here it is, at their confluence, that according to an old legend a fairy dragon, the same whose image is carved over the church door, used to come and drink. Pleasant walks follow the stream where the valley narrows. A path climbs the hill to the north through beechwoods. Priscilla and I used to walk there in the old days when we were happy together. I could talk to her in those green and russet alleys with greater freedom than at home. I would speak to her of my love and of the infinite tenderness of God who had made the world so beautiful, and she seemed less frightened of the subject there in the sweet smelling woods where little birds called and bluebells spread a blue carpet in the shade than when she was "cooped up," as she put it, in my study. She would swing along quietly beside me and answer in monosyllables or say gently when I begged her to love the Lord Jesus as I did:

"I will try, Simon, I will try."

From these woods one has a very fine view westwards, where the valley opens out to a blue and lazy distance. Farms lie scattered there and the spires of churches show above the jumbled roofs of other villages. Creech nestles under the hill. Seen from above it looks like a brown nest tucked among the reeds. But of an evening the sun

streams over the valley, the rich pastureland, the shimmering rivers, and as it sinks floods the gentle landscape with glory and lights up the little windows of the village houses with a crimson glow.

A gentle, sleepy country. Cattle stand in the deep grass. White swans float in the stream and go sailing proudly under the stone bridge where patient old men dangle interminable lines into the gleaming pool and silently flick rare small silver fishes out of the water. Two prehistoric fishermen there were before the war, I never saw them come or go or say one word to each other or make any movement but that movement of the wrist. A conservative place and somnolent until the war came. The high road to Exminster passed three miles to the south on the far side of the Toone meadows. Not many motors came our way, not many traps stood in the cobbled streets. Save on market day the village green was quiet. White ducks waddled before the Green Lion. Cats sunned themselves in doorways. Housewives with baskets on their arms stopped to chat together at corners. Sands the butcher came out to his doorstep wiping his knife on his apron, to turn his big red face to the sky and pass the time of day with anyone who might happen along. The sound of laughing voices came up from the river bank where the young girls and women were doing their family washing.

When I first came home after my brother Edward's death the people were very friendly. I received many a hearty handshake and shy nod of welcome.

The doctors had ordered me to take a complete rest after my breakdown, and for three months I stayed quietly at home, allowing my mother to nurse me and living peacefully, with an exceptional fullness, the inner life that was so sweet to my soul. My fever seemed in a strange way to have been a preparation for a period of great spiritual enjoyment. My physical exhaustion set free my mind. I was particularly free from any sense of inner tension and

struggle. In that delicious weakness of convalescence the devil left me alone.

It is very difficult to describe the mystic life of the spirit, and yet I would like if I could to describe it, to recall to myself the quality of its beauty—for it is gone. I have lost the way to it. It remains to me only a memory, like the lovely and mysterious landscape of an enchanted country that I once visited.

It was, in those days before I married Priscilla and when I was completely given up to the love of my Lord Jesus Christ, as if I inhabited two countries and as if I had two homes, the fine old manor that was the home of my boyhood, and another even more beautiful and more comfortable and with which I was even more intimately acquainted.

There was the village of Creech and the Manor of Creech St. Michael's and all the pleasant country stretching round, the wooded hills over which I wandered, the trees my brother had climbed while I stood underneath, fainthearted and fascinated by his audacity, the river where we used to go swimming, the old mill, the pretty shy lanes meandering through high hedges of hawthorn, and the wide blue land opening out to the west; there was the sedate and benevolent house where I had been born, with its rich larders that we rifled as children, and its library walled to the ceiling with books and its silvery leaded windows and fine dark polished stair; there was the garden all a-bloom with glorious crimson and gold and blue. Blue delphiniums banked the brick paths between the box hedges. Sweet-briar formed fragrant tunnels of tenderest green. Wall-flowers and heliotrope and mignonette saturated the shimmering, sunny air, marigolds and poppies, canterbury bells and tall hollyhocks lifted their gay, sweet heads to the gentle breezes that played there. There was all this that made up my worldly habitation, and then there was another place. It was equally real. How shall I put it? It was as if I passed through a little gate from the garden into

another world. I stepped from one place that I knew and loved into another that was close at hand yet as utterly different as the Sahara desert from the garden I have just been describing, utterly different but far more beautiful.

I cannot say what it looked like, that it looked like this or that. It was not a land made up of rivers and trees and meadows. Sometimes I found myself in a meadow, walking with the Lord Jesus, it is true, but that meadow starred with daisies was unimportant, just a pleasant dream-episode, a little kindly whim of my Lord's to make me laugh. The place itself had nothing of the quality of a dream. It was a place of perfect stillness, of unutterable peace. The atmosphere was luminous, superlatively still and clear as the breath of crystal. Sometimes at a great height in the mountains when there is no wind stirring I have caught a whiff of some trembling breath of air travelling down from the ether, exquisitely pure and delicious, that reminded me of it faintly. Did pearls give off perfume such would be their scent, I fancy.

The spirit of God dwelt in that place, and His Only Begotten Son waited there for me. I would find Him waiting.

I have no words with which to describe Him. I am no writer. My pen is a clumsy and faltering tool, but I came once upon lines in a book that seem to convey something of what I felt in my Lord's presence, and turn them to my use.

"Beautiful beyond the beauty of evening and dawn, visible to those who see with the soul's sight, and I seeing would rejoice and awe would fall upon me and a trouble deeper than any other thing can give, for I stood before the Authentic King of all mystery. And this is the spirit that waited upon me in His Presence, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and an awe blended with delight. A great exultation possessed me, a straining upwards of all my being, a longing to break away from my body and live self-gathered in His very Self.

"I, in the loneliness of myself, beheld that lonely dwelling Being, the Apart, the Single, the Pure, the Being from which all things depend.

"One that shall know this vision, with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire. He will be flooded with awe and gladness, pierced by a salutary wound. Every love other than this he must needs despise."

So Plotinus of Alexandria wrote of Beauty, and I who can find no words of my own use his, to describe the ecstasy that I knew in the love of Jesus Christ.

If any true lover should read these lines he will perhaps know what I mean when I say that in this place where He dwelt the air which I breathed was electric, as if distilled from His very Being, the light was a living light that came from Him. It was as if the love in His eyes shone out like a visible beam far beyond Him, reached out, enveloped me, pervaded me as a warm shaft of sunlight. I basked in it. I existed in His look. I was saturated with it, I became a thing of light, I had no weight and no substance, I was transmuted into His self.

It was my habit to rise every morning at five o'clock and spend the time until breakfast in meditation and prayer. As a rule it was during these morning hours that my soul communed most happily with Him, for during the day something was sure to occur which brought home to me the pitiful plight of my fellow-creatures and I would be constrained at night when I again retired to my closet to pray in great pain of spirit for all those who did not know the Lord Jesus and were lost. My morning prayers were a joyful delectation to my heart. My nights were spent in intercession, often in tears.

During the day I went about among the sons of men. I talked to my mother, to the gardeners, to the villagers, but the hours between the two intense experiences of night and morning were by comparison unreal and dreamlike. I was still under the influence of that other world. When I

came down to breakfast the grape fruit conveyed no taste to my palate, my mother's little plaintive chirping voice came from a distance. The village street when I entered it was like a painted picture. I expected to see it roll up like a scroll, revealing the other lovely landscape to my wonderfully haunted eyes. Sometimes I did not notice a motor or carriage coming down on me and would be roused by shouts and have to step quickly aside to escape being run over. I did not always see the passers-by, and am afraid that I often failed to reply to their friendly nods. It seemed to me that I still walked with the Lord Jesus along the cobblestones. I felt Him beside me. The beatitude of this celestial companionship no doubt gave me a very strange appearance. I remember that the people used to stare, but quite kindly.

As the day wore on, however, the sights and sounds of the everyday world would gradually dispel the magic of the morning. I would become aware of the mud puddles, the rain, the wind, the heavy figures of men plodding, digging, carting, working with pick-axes, pitchforks, slouching in wagons, lounging in doorways, reeling drunkenly home. Contented enough they looked, far, far too contented, contented as brutes are; wanting nothing, thinking perhaps of a warm supper, a warm fire, a bed for their weariness. Dreaming heavily, obscurely, of a better time, a lazier time, coming. Hoping for ease, a larger mug of beer, a few more shillings to spend. Unaware of their darkness or of any mystery surrounding them or of what they were missing, unaware of the love of God which I longed to impart to them, and of the treasures He had laid up for those that loved Him.

The equanimity of men has always baffled me. I do not understand the complacency with which they live and die. To me, life is an awe-inspiring and terrible drama, and the history of the human race an incomprehensible tragedy. For I know that God created man in order that he should share in His glory, and sent His

Only Begotten Son to save men from their sins, and I know that even in the quiet village of Creech there were scarcely a dozen souls who cared at all for Jesus Christ or spent an hour a week thinking about Him. How then could I be calm? It is the fashion to be calm in this country. We have set up a standard of gentlemanly behaviour in the Church of England. We do not stress the unpleasant, that is to say the terrible truths upon which, nevertheless, our faith is founded. But I who was obsessed by the glorious purity of my Master and filled with His love, could not rest while men ignored Him, and so my life was spent between the extremes of joy in Him and despair for those who did not know Him, and whom I truly believed were condemned to be thrust into that awful outer darkness which lasts forever and is called Hell.

The people of Creech had welcomed me warmly when I came back as Lord of the Manor and when after the death, some four months later, of the old Vicar I took myself the living, they accepted me as their pastor, if not with enthusiasm at any rate with the same equanimity which I have mentioned. I soon found out, however, what was expected of me. They did not want a spiritual friend. They did not want me to love them and care for their souls. I was there to see that they were christened and married and buried decently in the Church as their fathers had been before them. Beyond this, except on Sundays when I was to repeat from the pulpit the prayers in the Prayer Book, and say a few incomprehensible words to which they need not listen, I was to leave them alone. "What is a parson to them?" I would ask myself in despair, and now again ask it. What is he? He is just a conventionalised being whom they are accustomed to see about as they are accustomed to see Sands the butcher and Willard the miller. The miller is dusted white with his flour, the butcher wears a bloody apron, the parson wears a different collar from most men. That, for their

daily life, is all he amounts to. They don't want to be bothered about eternal truths and everlasting mysteries, but they want him there in the background all the same, against the day when they shall be afraid of meeting their Creator, and the day comes and they turn to him and ask him for an antidote to their terror, and he gives it to them obediently as a doctor writes out a prescription, for that is his job; to reassure them in the presence of an incalculable uncertainty, to give a certificate of life when death rattles in their throats, to hand them a safe-conduct for that last, long, uncharted voyage from which no one has ever returned.

The country people of England, at least in our county, seem to be particularly devoid of religious feeling or spiritual insight. Not that I did not make some friends in the village. There was Miss Crawley, a devout and elderly spinster who decorated the church most beautifully for the harvest festivals, and Lily Boots, the little bed-ridden daughter of Farmer Boots across the river, and old Burridge, the hunchback, whom I made sexton (to the disgust I fear of Miss Maffit, the schoolmistress, who had quite a turn when she saw him for the first time sweeping the porch) and Mrs. Penny, the charwoman, who went out in daily service and lived in a room at the back of the Widow Brown's cottage in Willow Lane behind the mill. Lily and I used to have fine times on dreary winter afternoons making illuminated texts with crimson and blue and gold lettering. Mrs. Penny was a great one for prayer. We would kneel together in her immaculate room on her freshly-scrubbed floor and she would pour forth a loud song of praise, interrupted every now and then by such phrases as "Drat those chickens," or "There's that child again. He'll fall down the well." She kept a weather eye open and knew what dire things were going forward in the dilapidated strip of garden outside the door while she prayed, but her prayers were genuine for all that, and always cheerful. Always she was thanking the Lord

for something, for keeping her out of the poorhouse and giving her two good hands to scrub with, for taking care of the Royal Family, and their son the Prince of Wales, and blessing them with health and strength, she never forgot the Royal Family, for sending a fine boy to Mary Bromley, who had five daughters already, and for the cough mixture the district nurse had brought her on a Thursday which had eased the pain in her chest something wonderful. Oh, sublime Eliza Penny, widowed this thirty years and with no chick nor child of her own to look after her in her old age, though she had borne four sons into the world in that bygone time when, as she would tell me, she was a comely young thing and had a great liking for bright colours. "Poppies in me 'at once, would you believe it, sir, I had a straw with red poppies all round," and she would laugh delightedly, all her wizened face wrinkled with pleasure.

Eliza was my friend, my sister in Christ. She and Lady Agatha were the only people in the neighbourhood with whom I could pray, with whom I was truly at home.

Such was my life at Creech until I married Priscilla, a double life of which the part I spent among men was like a dream, a dream in which I struggled desperately and in anguish, while the part that I spent alone with God was the reality.

Priscilla changed all that. She was real too, as real as God, more so.

That is blasphemy.

What matter? It is not the phrase but the fact that is terrible.

And how else, if not in words that sound blasphemous, am I to explain what happened.

I knew when I married her that she was an unbeliever, but I believed that I could win her to Christ. I failed. She never believed. The most that I ever wrung out of her was an impatient muttered admission, "that, of course, there must be somewhere a God." Her manner

conveyed a sense of acute embarrassment at being obliged to mention the subject.

It is good for man not to touch a woman. I should have listened to those words and made myself an eunuch for the Kingdom of God.

Oh, fool that I was to have believed that I could take Priscilla with me into His Holy Sanctuary. I knew all the time, I have known always, that priests should be celibate, that chastity is the *sine qua non* of a life devoted exclusively to the service of Christ. This is only common sense. Saint Paul has explained it perfectly clearly: "He who is not married thinks how he may please Christ. He who is married thinks how he may please his wife."

I deluded myself. I was dishonest. I said to myself, "I will bring Priscilla to God. I will save her soul." It was an excuse to get her for my own.

And yet, and yet—the memory of that time when Priscilla and I were happy together comes over me even now with a wild, hopeless sweetness, and even now I cannot deny it, cannot find it wrong or ugly or bestial. It was sweet. It was sweet. How long ago it was—but often of a winter's evening, a sound, a smell, the whisper of the wind, or the acrid scent of burning leaves, will bring it all back to me in a rush of obliterating reality. Then I imagine that Priscilla is here. Sitting alone in my study I wait for her to come in from her hunting, muddy and breathless and laughing, her pale face rosy, her eyes darkly shining. In a moment the door will burst open. She will be here. She will lay her frosty cheek against mine. She will drag me out into the hall where tea is waiting and will fall on her toast and eggs like a hungry young lion, then stretch out lazily by the fire, her muddy boots on the fender, and I will dote on her as I used to do.

Often, too, in the morning I catch myself listening for the sound of the ear-splitting whistle she used to let out as she made for the stables, calling the dogs, two fingers

of each hand in her mouth. She learned it from the village boys.

She was just a well-bred English country girl when I married her, and she was too much for me. I made no impression on her mind. It is she who has left her mark on me. She has destroyed my faith as truly as any lascivious woman ever destroyed the innocence of a youth, and she was the very opposite of such women. There was nothing voluptuous about her. She was cool and slender and strong. She was like a tree, a birch tree, slim, white, deep-rooted in the soil of her England. Her feet were firm on the ground, her head was sunny. There was a light on her clear face. Little jokes and chuckles played about it as a flickering sunlight plays through dipping leaves.

I see her like that, grave, but with a whimsical light playing on her.

She had little of what men call beauty. Often I have reassured myself with the statement that she was not beautiful. Her face was too broad, her cheek bones were too prominent, her jaws too square. Her pale cheeks hollowed in faintly between these bones, and her eyes, deeply set and very wide apart, made a broad tragic band of darkness across her face that was in troubling contrast to her funny nose and her humorous mouth. The effect of the eyes was to make the whole face look small and fragile in spite of its obstinate squareness.

When she was tired she was plain. I adored her tired, wan plainness. The little blue veins that showed round the corners of her eyes next the bridge of her short nose ravished me with a kind of ecstatic pain. The cold snowy pallor of her stern face riveted my gaze as no rosy or velvety cheeks could have done. Alas, she was infinitely more compelling than a seductive beauty.

Had she been soft and sensual I would have revolted and escaped her. But she had instead a youthful dignity that was infinitely beguiling, an austere aloofness that held me spellbound, that holds me still.

And she had not the faintest understanding of spiritual things nor any interest in them whatever. She was congenitally irreligious. She has remained so. William Tweedle once advised me to leave her alone. I wonder, had I taken his advice—? But how could I? I was responsible for her to God. Moreover, I understand marriage as a sacrament, a complete spiritual union. If Priscilla and I could not be one in spirit, then the union of our bodies became hideous.

Just as the true teaching of the Church makes it clear that it is only permissible to live with a woman according to the flesh in order to have children, so it is true that without the marriage of the soul the love of the body is nothing but lust. This I did truly believe.

But besides this, belief or no belief, I longed, because I loved her so, to share every pleasure of my life with her, to undertake no work which she could not share, to have her always in sight and within reach of my hand, and I intended and fervently hoped to take her with me eventually, even into that mysterious solitude, that place of mystic meditation where my soul withdrew to be with God.

CHAPTER IV

THE difficulty was that her idea of marriage did not in the least resemble mine. It implied a large, loose, elastic arrangement by virtue of which each of the two concerned went his own way, cheerfully indifferent as to what the other was doing. Her friends lived that way. They considered it a nuisance, so I gathered, to have a man hanging about the house. Priscilla of course did not draw invidious comparisons, but I could not avoid drawing them myself and observing that in my family the usual thing was rather comically reversed. It was I who stayed at home, Priscilla who went off. Even during the first year of our married life she was constantly going up to town of a Saturday. Occasionally she insisted on my going with her, to cheer me up, as she said. We would lunch and go to a concert or poke about in old bookshops. It was this that I liked best. There was something thrilling to me in wandering about London with Priscilla, the more crowded and obscure the streets, the closer she seemed to me, especially in the winter, when the night closed in early of an afternoon and a million lights flared up in the tumultuous, cavernous thoroughfares and there was a great noise and clanging. Then she would cling to my arm and we would dive gaily under the noses of buses and lose our way lightheartedly, and perhaps miss our train and have supper in some cosy little restaurant in Soho before going home. Once she took me to a music hall, but that was horrible, a vulgar and dissolute spectacle revolving round a terrible man, a famous comedian, who leered and postured and made incomprehensible jokes that filled Priscilla with merriment. I remember well how she chuckled and every now and then burst into loud squeaks of delight while

I shrank miserably in my seat, all my nerves on edge and my heart sick with disgust. And she could not understand

"Didn't it amuse you, Simon?" she asked.

"No, dear."

"But he was so funny, Simon, when he put on that hat."

"I found him hideous."

"Oh, of course he's ugly."

"I mean morally as well as physically."

"Oh."

"It was horrible, Priscilla, horrible."

"I'm so sorry you didn't like it, Simon. I hoped it would make you laugh."

I tried to explain what I felt. I tried to make her see the ugliness, the ungodliness, but all she would say was, "What a pity I wasted your afternoon, Simon. We won't try any more shows."

She was baffling.

If I didn't enjoy low comedies, then I mustn't go to them, that was all. She would go without me, and she did, and I was too cowardly to try to stop her.

She thought of me, I realised, as of someone apart, as a creature of a different genus from herself, as a sort of sacred freak, and she was content to accept the difference between us as final. She had no desire to enter my world, and if I didn't like hers, she would contentedly leave me out of it. That was what it amounted to.

It didn't seem to occur to her that there was anything wrong in such an arrangement. She appeared utterly free from remorse concerning me, or any prickings of conscience. That there was any evil in what she enjoyed was an idea that never entered her head.

Her serenity was as complete as her indifference to the things of the spirit, so complete that it daunted me. I was afraid to attack it. Her personality was so dominating that though I knew she was wrong, I felt in her presence that she was right. I loved her abjectedly. I gave up

more and more of my time to thinking about her. The words of rebuke and of revelation that came to my lips died there. I could do nothing but lock myself up and pray that light might come to her, for I knew when I was alone with God that she was in darkness and that the splendour of her personality was but a mirage to dazzle me, a shadow, a fugitive thing that entered into the matter of her flesh to intoxicate my senses.

I dared not tell her this. When I tried to talk to her of her soul she would flush with embarrassment as if I were guilty of an indecency.

It has never been easy for me to plead the cause of Christ with men of my own class. I am always obliged to overcome at the time a very painful sense of repugnance. In my settlement in Silvertown down by the London docks it was very different, but at home, when the spirit has led me to question some friend of good social standing concerning the salvation of his or her soul, I have always felt very timid and reluctant. I have had to whip myself up to it. Often my instinctive reaction to the leading of the spirit was to rebel, to object that such behaviour was a tactless impertinence. This foolish diffidence made it very difficult for me to insist with Priscilla, and there was that in her manner which made it even more than difficult, well-nigh impossible.

She was so shy of discussing religion that I realised I must go carefully, so I abandoned these talks and began a new plan, asking her to help me one evening with my sermon for the next Sunday by looking up some references in the Scriptures with the help of a concordance. She agreed cheerfully.

"Of course, Simon, but I don't know what a concordance is." I said I would show her. I installed her in a chair close to my own and put the concordance and a Bible in front of her.

"What I want you to do, Priscilla, is to look up all the places in the Bible where manna is referred to. The

references are collected in the concordance under the word manna. You see, it is a kind of dictionary or reference book. Look up manna as you would in a dictionary, then find in the Bible each reference mentioned under that heading."

"Ah, I see." She put her elbow on the table and opened the book, puckering her brows. I turned happily to my sermon and began to write.

"I've found manna, Simon," she announced presently.

"Splendid," I murmured absently, pen poised in the middle of a sentence.

"But what does this mean, Simon? There are funny little marks, then the words Hebrews, chap. ix, verse iv. What do I do now?"

"The Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter nine, verse four. You look it up, dear."

"Where?"

"In the Bible. Then put a slip of paper as a mark in the place with the number of the verse on it, so that I can turn to it. There are the slips beside you."

"Oh."

I wrote a paragraph. It took me, I should say, about ten minutes. As I finished it I heard her say:

"Oh, bother. Where is the beastly thing?"

"What is it, Priscilla?"

"I can't find it, Simon."

"Can't find what, dear?"

"Hebrews."

I looked over her shoulder. She was feverishly turning the pages of the Old Testament. Her face was flushed. She was biting her lower lip. Her hair was rumpled.

"Dash it, I've looked everywhere."

"But you are looking in the Old Testament."

"Isn't it there?"

"No, it comes after the Epistle to the Romans. There it is. Don't you know the books of the Bible, Priscilla?"

"No, Simon."

" Haven't you ever read the Bible ? "

" No, Simon, that is, yes, Mummy made me, but I only remember the thrilling bits."

" What bits do you mean ? "

" Oh, about Sodom and Gomorrah and the pillar of salt, and the ravens feeding Elijah, and Abraham taking Isaac into the desert to kill him, and the plagues. I liked the plagues best. Mummy used to read to me a lot of course, but I never could remember the dull parts, but I loved all that about Jezebel being eaten by dogs."

And suddenly Priscilla went off into a wild shriek of laughter. " Oh, Simon, Simon, you look so funny. Don't be so shocked, Simon. You look so awfully comic and pathetic."

When she had quieted down and we had agreed that it was hopeless for her to attempt to help me in that way, as according to our calculations it would take her about thirty-six solid hours of work to look up the references I wanted, she said apologetically :

" I'm awfully sorry, Simon. Does it matter much ? I'll try to learn how to do it if you really want me to, if you need the help, you know."

" It's not that I need the help so much, my darling, it's that I hoped you'd enjoy——"

I stopped. Her eyes had opened in a startling fashion.

" You don't enjoy this sort of work, dear ? " I asked. " You couldn't like doing it ? Because if you don't, I can't ask you, I wouldn't want you——" Priscilla stared.

" Like it, Simon ? Enjoy it ? Do you mean that you do ? " These were her words. They left me, at the moment, speechless.

I let her go her own way for some weeks after this. I scarcely saw her day in and day out. Then one afternoon she came into my study timidly, and laid her cool cheek against mine.

" Mummy says I'm not helping you enough, Simon. Is it true ? She says that I do not appreciate what it

means being the wife of such a gifted man. Do you think that, Simon?" I gathered her close, denying the imputation, but she went on in a low, hesitating voice, fumbling for her words, standing in the crook of my arm, her hand on my shoulder:

"I do appreciate it, Simon, I do indeed. You—you impress me awfully. I know Bunny does everything. Perhaps I don't do my duty, but I'm afraid, I think, to butt in. I have a sort of feeling that my duty is to do the things that don't interest you about the estate and to amuse you, Simon, if you know what I mean, to be the comic relief, no, not comic, but the relief. Bunny runs the house and the parish and I, I try to make you happy and jolly. You are so good, Simon, so good. I don't believe you ever did a horrid thing or a mean thing in all your life. And you're awfully clever, I know that, and so awfully in earnest." She sighed. "Poor Simon," she murmured, stroking my hair with a rare unaccustomed gesture, "glued to your desk all day. I wish you would hunt and do things, but of course it's not worth your while, I know that, and its awfully noble of you not to. I wanted to tell you, just once, how much I admire you for it," and then overwhelmed with shyness, with confusion, she fled.

The worst of it was that while I could not make my world attractive to her, she without effort made hers all too much so to me. My devotions no longer satisfied me. Without noticing the change, I rose later and later in the morning. There were days when I had no time at all for prayer before breakfast, and when I did get up at six or seven and retired to my room, I was far too sleepy to attain to the presence of my Lord. Rarely I entered now into that magic place where He dwelt, and often I would find myself wondering in the middle of my prayers whether Priscilla was awake yet, and would be sorely tempted to go back and share her early cup of tea in that enchanting room where she lay with all her things strewn about in a delightful disorder, her blue satin quilted slippers, her soft silken

wadded dressing-gown, her clothes that she had thrown over a chair. The fire would be lighted by now and crackling merrily. Minchin would have put the dainty tea tray by her bed and drawn back the curtains from the deep windows. Priscilla would be rubbing her eyes with her fists or perhaps had gone to sleep again.

"God have mercy upon me," I would repeat again and again, in a monotonous murmur, kneeling in my cold room. "Deliver us from temptation."

Such prayers are fruitless. I would go down to breakfast at last, exhausted and ravenous, and punish myself by eating nothing but dry toast, while Priscilla, dressed for hunting or glowing from a romp in the garden, would gobble up enough eggs, sausage, bacon and marmalade for three people.

I envied her. She was sorry for me.

She had her own standards and regarded them as absolute.

In regard to her friendships she was adamant. One didn't, it appeared, criticise one's friends, and took the good with the bad and did not worry. They'd come out all right, and how could they help being what they were? Even that dreadful girl Puss Featherstone, who painted her face like a nautch girl and smelt strongly of some unclean Eastern scent, was really an awfully good sort. That was enough apparently for Priscilla, just as it was enough for her that a man should be a gentleman. It was on this ground that she professed a liking for the Marquis of Moone. I remember her saying once, "Yes, he's a very great gentleman."

She said this with a finality, with a placid arrogance, her head lifted, her eyebrows lifted, the corners of her mouth lifting very slightly, almost she seemed on her toes, as if she were making an irrefutable statement of the utmost importance, of the very highest significance, as if she were saying the last, the ultimate word, the only word that was needed to put a man beyond the reach of criticism.

"He is a very great gentleman." I can hear her say it.

He might be a blackguard, he might be a bore, he might be a murderer, a wife-beater, a drunkard, a blasphemer, no matter. He was a very great gentleman.

I stared at her. I saw all at once incarnate in her the baffling, stubborn, fallacious pride of the great, dreary, doomed world of men. I saw behind her, surrounding and flanking her, all the great, honourable, richly endowed, horse-racing, hunting, gambling, wine-bibbing, blasphemous and ribald world of English gentlemen, great gentlemen who had no need of salvation, who invited the poor, ill-nourished parsons to dinner on Sundays, who gave away livings and owned churches and attended them as a concession to the habit of respectability, and solemnly read out the word of God from pulpits, because they were not sufficiently interested in what they were reading to take in the meaning and stay away; great gentlemen as blind as bats, as deaf as posts, as thick skinned as elephants, as unimaginative as horses or cows or sheep, upon whom the most impassioned appeal, the most inspired message, the most solemn warning or scathing abuse had no more effect than it would have upon the comfortable beasts of the field.

I suppose that I should be ashamed of that outburst, but it is a luxury to me to allow myself now at last to say what I think, to give vent to feelings that for years I have repressed, and the truth is that all these people, William Tweedle, the Moones and Crab Willing and all the rest of them, standing as they did for everything that was inimical to my belief and my calling, alarmed me long before I came into direct conflict with any of them. They were so sure of themselves, so satisfied, so invulnerable that they depressed me and made me excessively nervous. I knew that they were damned, but I knew that I could never make them see it. They knew that they were sinners and they didn't care.

It would have struck William Tweedle as very comic and Lord Moone as excessively impertinent had they known

that I often prayed for them, yet I did it. I was bound to. It went against the grain. It was unpleasant to be conscious of the resentment and mockery they would level at me if they knew what I was doing. I was aware of the ludicrousness of spending the night on my knees interceding with God on their behalf. I was even haunted by a vague sense of an apparent indecency in forcing my unwanted spiritual attentions on these gentlemen, and yet I knew that in the eyes of God they were nothing more than a couple of feeble old men who were tottering to their graves and who one day would stand stripped, shivering, naked and ugly before His awful judgement seat, and so I persisted, and with Priscilla asleep behind the brocaded hangings of her bed, I sent out into the night, into the stillness, sent up through the hushed, sleeping world a cry, an appeal, earnest, honest, at times desperate, for these men who were, I felt, my enemies and who did, I know, despise me.

Ah, but what if it was really ludicrous, what then? Suppose that it was really indecent, impertinent, nothing more than a hopeless kind of unpardonable meddling with other people's concerns? What, if that is true, becomes of my life? What has it been for? What is its excuse?

God pity me. I do not know. I no longer feel sure that I have not been just a self-righteous cad, for it has all gone wrong. Everything has gone wrong. They have all been too much for me. William Tweedle is the same. Lord Moone is the same. They are all what they were. Only I am broken. Even Priscilla is the same, utterly, absolutely for ever unchanged.

She is here to-night in this old house that has absorbed into its stones so much of human suffering. If I allowed my fancy its way, I could easily believe that she is upstairs in her room asleep. The lamp is lighted beside the great canopied bed. She has left it lighted for me and has fallen asleep, her boyish head on her arm. It shines softly on her face and on the brocaded curtains of faded

old rose and blue and gold. The rest of the room is in shadow, the inlaid table and high chest of walnut show dimly little reflected lights gleaming in the dark polished surfaces of the wood. A few last red embers glow in the grate under the carved marble mantelpiece.

How often have I crept into that warm and fragrant room, cold and shivering, my teeth chattering, my body shaking, exhausted by long hours of prayer, fearing to wake her, yet hoping she would wake, longing for the relief, the rest, the physical comfort, that she alone could give me. And she was kind. She did not understand, but she was kind. She would stir in her sleep, open her strong young arms and gather me close as if I were a child, and the awful sense of a world lost in sin, whirling on through space to a ghastly calamity, that had kept me on my knees in my cold room, would dissolve. Ah, the luxury of giving in to the weakness that made her tender.

Often I gave in to it. Like a sick child I clung to her, drawing warmth from her drowsy breast, whispering her name, calling to her in whispers, and she would wake and tighten her arms round me and murmur :

" Poor Simon, my poor Simon."

Our voices hovered over us in the dark, her's strong and deep, mine feeble and broken.

" Hold me close, Priscilla."

" Yes."

" Always."

" Yes."

" Say that you love me."

" I do."

" Say it, Priscilla, oh, do say it."

" I love you, Simon."

" Even now ? Even when I'm like this ? "

" Even now, especially now."

And at last I would fall asleep in her arms.

That was long ago, before the war, before she lost her child. Not for many years now have I gone to her arms that

were my refuge. God took this happiness and comfort from me. He in His wisdom saw fit to deprive me of the relief I found in her. She was like a raft to me, when I was sinking, like a strong spar. She was a ship to bear me home. It was too much. It meant too much. God is a jealous God. He commanded me to follow the way of the Cross and to be for ever alone.

But she never knew what it cost me to give her up. How could she know? When I tried to explain I saw two suspicions awake in her mind, one that I was mad, the other that I no longer cared for her.

She was incapable of understanding the meaning of sacrifice. Sacrifice; what is it? Do I understand it myself? Is it after all so fine a thing as we imagine? There are two kinds of pleasure to be derived from a coveted thing, the pleasure of possessing and the pleasure of choosing to do without. The "volupté" of unsatisfied desire against the satisfaction of appetite. One is certainly finer than the other in the sense that it is keener, more exquisite, but has the mortifying of one's flesh or the starving of one's senses any moral value? I am no longer sure. I wonder if it is not just a trick to induce ecstasy, a trick learned hundreds of years ago by mad monks in gloomy cloisters.

Did I, I ask myself now, derive some strange and subtle delight from refusing to satisfy my passion for Priscilla? Was it purely because I knew it to be against God's will that I denied myself? I cannot tell. My motives, my reasoning, my feelings about this and indeed about everything that concerns Priscilla are obscure to me and too complex for analysis. Someone once said to me, Tweedle perhaps, or did I read it in a book, that we believe what we want to believe, but that cannot surely be true of me, for I believed the Bible quite simply, all of it, and tried to live according to Christ's doctrine as recorded in that Holy Book, Whose Author was not Simon Birch but God Himself.

But again, if the Bible is true, why did its truth never

convince or even interest Priscilla? I cannot answer that question. I shall never be able to answer it. I fall back on my one poor discovery, namely that there would seem to be an untranslatable quality inherent in the mystic life. One cannot apparently hand it on, or convey even a faint idea of its beauty to one who is uninitiated. Only to those who in their separate lonely ways have penetrated to its mysterious confines can one talk of it with any hope of being understood. Mysticism is like a distant country to which solitary travellers go, one by one, each one travelling separately and unable to tell afterwards by what route he went. Nor do they meet there, those who are admitted. No one in that place is aware of the presence of any other but God.

But in ordinary life they recognise each other. They know when they meet that they have been to the same place and are citizens of the same country that is beyond the stars, and they can talk of the things they have seen there.

It was so with Lady Agatha and myself. We recognised each other. We spoke the same language. But Priscilla and I never understood each other. There was always a barrier between us. My love for her seemed to be of no use in my endeavour to explain to her what mattered to me more than anything in the world. I never found a single word that could carry to her mind or heart the meaning that was in mine.

The only result of my endeavour was to make her dislike being with me. She grew to be afraid of me. I have seen it in her face more than once. When I went to her with the purpose of talking to her seriously she would instinctively want to bolt. She would quiver, her nostrils would dilate, she reminded me of a frightened horse rearing up. No doubt if we had been living together normally she would not have felt so ill at ease in my presence. She was animal, far too animal for the trial she was subjected to, but she fell in love with Crab Willing

before, that is the point. She fell in love with him at Jericho Sands that Christmas before the war and before her illness, when we had been married less than two years, and when I thought that she was happy with me.

Three calamities, I note them—Priscilla's childlessness, the war, Crab Willing's appearance at Creech when he came home on leave. In the long chain of events I find these three fastened together, forged links in the solid, indivisible cable that appears to have been fashioned by a giant craftsman. Fate, she is called, the one who spins those iron threads, but I do not believe in Fate, I believe in the will of God, and I turn dizzy at the thought that God willed these things.

CHAPTER V

It was immediately after Crab Willing's visit that I was commanded by Him who made me a priest unto God to change my method with Priscilla. He made clear to me that I was a coward in all that concerned her and ordered me in unmistakable accents to press upon her with great earnestness the peril of her soul.

That is a lie. I have just read it over. What I really mean is that after Crab had gone back to the front I began to nag Priscilla and to torment her. Up to that time I had been diffident and gentle with her, now I became harsh and peevish. I found fault with her constantly, with her clothes, her conduct, her speech. I made her give up wearing her farm breeches and ordered her, yes, ordered her, to stop smoking. I complained of her rare loud bursts of laughter and upbraided her for taking the name of God in vain, for she sometimes said—"Good God," or "Damn," reminding me most unpleasantly of her dissolute father, the Colonel, and on top of this I thrust devotional books into her hands, books of sermons, books of Christian theology, tracts, and bade her read them, but she seemed to be merely bewildered and bothered by all these things and smoked surreptitiously in her bedroom, and was not of course led to believe in Christ, but rather to prevaricate and hide her thoughts.

She took to avoiding me. Often when catching sight of her from my window I went out into the garden to join her, I found that she had disappeared. I am certain that she saw me coming and ran away. When I did succeed in hunting her down, her manner was strained and nervous.

"What is it, Simon?" she would ask with a look of apprehension.

"I want to talk to you."

"Oh."

"Does my presence annoy you?"

"No, of course not, Simon."

"But it bores you to talk to me?"

"No, no."

"But it does, Priscilla. Everything that I stand for wearies you to death. Admit it."

"That's not true," she would mutter, but I would press on, regardless of her denial.

"Why did you marry me, Priscilla, if my calling is so obnoxious to you? What made you marry me?"

"Oh, Simon, please——"

"You take no interest in the Church."

"But I do."

"You have not taken Holy Communion for a long time. You did not even attend Divine service last Sunday."

"I am sorry, Simon. I had to go to Exminster. There was a sudden rush of wounded. They telephoned for supplies."

"If you spent even a little of the energy you lavish on your hospitals in trying to help me——"

"I do try, Simon. I would gladly if I could, I know I'm not much good to you."

"You feel that?"

"Yes."

"You realise there is something wrong?"

"Yes; oh, yes."

"Don't you know what it is?"

"No, that is, I can't be different."

"But you can, if only you will try. The fact is that you have set your mind against God, Priscilla, and against me."

"Oh, no, Simon."

"And you are unhappy because of it. You know that you are unhappy. Why do you no longer take Holy Communion, Priscilla?" No answer. "Is it because

you have something on your conscience? What makes your heart heavy?" Still no answer. "You are fighting against the truth, against the conviction of sin. In your heart you know that you are a sinful creature, Priscilla, but you won't give in. You won't even pray to God for help."

She would look at me with terror at this, but remain rigidly dumb.

Futile, unseemly interviews. What I really wanted was to force a confession of guilt out of her. The possibility of her suddenly bursting out with the words—"Well, it's true, I am in love with him," fascinated me as a dangerous obstacle will fascinate a man driving a motor car and lure him by a kind of hypnotic attraction to crash into it.

I knew she was thinking constantly of Crab. I watched her eyeing the *Times* every morning as if she were afraid to touch it. She never read the paper in the dining-room, but would creep off with it into a corner like a frightened dog with a bone, and pore over the Roll of Honour. I would find her doing it. I could not leave her in peace. Often I would lie in wait for her and corner her in the evenings when she came back from the farm or from some ambulance centre. I would drag her into my study and make her listen to me. There, where I had her in my power, I would struggle with her to break her down. It was like a wrestling match between our wills. Silent, tense, our minds grappled, she resisting, I closing in, pressing down, twisting her, wrenching her, trying to force her on her knees, but she resisted me, slipped out of my clutches, escaped, always.

I used a variety of formulæ during these struggles. Among other things, I tried to induce her to pray with me.

"Once again, Priscilla, I would plead with you to ask our Heavenly Father to help you in your unbelief. Won't you pray with me now? Won't you do this one thing for my sake?"

She would flush painfully, a sickening flood of crimson

would mount upwards from her throat. I remember how the red patches showed on its whiteness, and her eyes would dart this way and that.

"I can't, Simon, not here."

"Why, Priscilla?"

"I don't know."

"Are you afraid?"

She did not answer.

"You are afraid. What are you afraid of?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Are you afraid to go with me into the presence of God?"

"No, I'm not afraid, it's not that."

"You are ashamed, then?"

"Yes," in a very low tone.

"Ashamed to kneel down with me before God?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Simon, but I can't, I can't do it. Don't ask me to do it."

At last one dark winter's evening (I remember how the rain slashed against the windows and how cold and wretchedly tired she was after her long day) she broke out at me angrily, her deep voice grinding and grating through her teeth in an exasperation of exhausted nerves.

"Do for pity's sake leave me alone, Simon. I can't bear any more. I can't bear it. I want to stand by you, and I swear I will, if only you'll leave me alone."

Her face was haggard. She glared in a kind of furious, suppressed anguish.

"You accuse me of being unhappy. It's true. My friends are being killed every day. You want me to pray. What's the good of praying now? It's too late. Soon there'll be no one left to pray for, and whether I'm good or bad doesn't seem to matter much, does it, when all the men in the world are dying out there in the mud? Half a company of the 30th were drowned in a mud hole only last week. Nothing seems real after that."

She was thinking of Crab, I knew that. Her words instantly brought him into the room. His ghost strode in, stood between us.

Now that I think back on that time I realise that I was far from normal. The war hung over us like a black and suffocating cloud. We moved, Priscilla and I, in a breathless and stifling darkness.

And I was reviled and loathed by all the countryside because I was a pacifist.

"I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world and to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake. . . . Being reviled we bless, being persecuted we suffer it. . . . We are made as the filth of the world and are the off-scourings of all things."

Often I read St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians for my comfort during that time when the village and the county turned against me.

It is useless to pretend that I did not suffer from this. Although I bore the people who hated me no ill will and did indeed long to be of service to them, I nevertheless became very nervous. I avoided my colleagues even more carefully than they avoided me. I had to force myself to visit my parishioners. There were days when it was more than I could do to bicycle down the village street.

The village itself was transformed. It had become hideous. It was full of soldiers with girls on their arms who laughed brazenly in my face. In every lane one came upon interlaced couples. From behind every hedge laughs gurgled up and voices sounded like beasts grunting. The whole valley swarmed. Huge tents had been put up there and sheds with galvanised iron roofs. The roads were full of motor-lorries and marching troops and gun-carriages. There was an endless noise of grinding and rattling and banging. Men, horses, wagons, cars, streamed past along the high road beyond the now obliterated fields where a town of ugly huts were spread like a huge lumber camp.

And all the bustle seemed to have driven the people into

a delirium. I alone was aloof from it. I was the only stranger in the place where I was born.

Although I kept my promise to the Bishop and uttered no further word either in the pulpit or out of it that could possibly be construed as "unpatriotic," the harm was done. I had become an object of suspicion to the parish. The attendance at Divine Service fell off. There were Sundays when the Church was nearly empty. I had a great difficulty in keeping together even the semblance of a choir. Nothing but Priscilla's extraordinary popularity with the small boys of the village saved us there. My mother had several disagreeable experiences. Her working party that had always taken place on Wednesday afternoons had to be abandoned. Miss Maffit informed her that they were all too busy doing war work to go on sewing for orphans. Mrs. Boots, the farmer's wife, a self-righteous, ardent Churchwoman, took her children out of Sunday school and sent them five miles to St. Swithin's at Walebury. I was not encouraged to visit my little cripple friend Lily any more. It became a rare occurrence to be sent for even in cases of sickness. The cottages were closed to me. Even their small blinking windows seemed to have changed in expression. I no longer discerned nods and smiles between the crocheted curtains. Often as I came along the street a group before a doorway would disperse. I became accustomed to the sound of closing doors and of voices muffled as I passed. Occasionally I overheard words that were spoken behind me. Once a tipsy youth in khaki lurching in the doorway of the Green Lion called out—"Hi, parson, how's Kitchener doing without you?" words that were followed by a burst of laughter from the group behind him. And month by month came news of death to the village. First one was taken, then another. Scarce a cottage was left that did not hide the empty place of a husband, a son, that was gone, and they shut me out from the place of mourning. In their sorrow they hated me.

Mrs. Penny alone stood up for me. On her knees with

her scrubbing brush she would explain me to the housewives of the village.

"'E's a saint, 'e is. Look at 'is beautiful fice. Ain't it a picter o' kindness, I ask yer? 'E 'ates the war, does 'e, well, so do I, and so does all right-minded people, an' that's not saying as 'e won't stand by those as suffer. It's the war 'e's down on, not the boys as gets killed, the thing that's killin' 'em. It's Beelzebub's doin' 'e says, an' 'e's speakin' the truth."

Her championship didn't help me. I could not make them understand. They did not want to understand. I had shocked them profoundly. They, the humble and docile members of a lower class, sat in judgment on me.

It was not only that I was not a good Englishman in their eyes. It was not only against their deeply stirred patriotism that I offended. There was something more subtle in their animosity than this. They were ashamed of me for not being true to type. They despised me for not behaving as a gentleman should behave. The disaffected miners they could understand and the Socialist Wesleyan minister at Bridge village down the road, but that I, the Lord of the Manor, should be one o' them pacifists was more than they could stomach.

Once, incredible it seems now, one terrible evening, I was stoned, that is to say, some boys threw a few pebbles at me. It was the day that we had news of the Battle of Jutland. England was exalted to a frenzy by the fact that her cruisers had sent some thousand Germans to the bottom of the sea. I had come upon Molly Polson, the blacksmith's daughter, in the arms of a drunken soldier against the wall of Simpkin's stable, in full view of the village green and a group of pompous and ribald Tommies before the public house. I had stopped and had rebuked her in very severe language for her unseemly behaviour, and had laid my stick across the shoulders of the ruffian in khaki. All at once the soldiers on the other side of the green, seeing me, staggered forward. "Hands off there,

parson," someone bawled, "'e's a soldier in 'Is Majesty's Army, 'e is, 'e's a pal of ours, do you 'ear?" They surrounded me, threatening, shaking their fists in my face. Molly was sobbing by this time, her apron over her face. I bade them let me pass. They were not, I saw, men of the village. They fell back a little, made room for me, muttering angry words. As I moved off, some strange boys whom I did not know came running up, hooting and shouting. "Hi, wot's up?" "It's the parson as started to threaten the corporal," said a red-faced soldier. There was a great sound of laughter and jeering, in the crowd then, I did not hear what it was they said. Then a stone flew past my head, and another, only pebbles they were, thrown for sport by wild and ignorant boys, but I was seized with unreasonable panic. Desperately I resisted the impulse to run. A stone, only one, hit me, grazed my cheek. I walked on. They did not follow far. My cheeks were burning when I reached home, my hands shaking, my knees unsteady. I felt somewhat sick. I did not mention the occurrence, I could not bear to have Priscilla know.

But she heard about it, of course, and was very angry and without a word to me went straight to the Camp Commandant, who came to apologise in person. It was all very painful. Two of the men were penalised in some way, I believe, and the boys were dealt with at Priscilla's bidding. The scandal made things even more difficult for me in the village, and no easier with Priscilla. For one moment she had rushed in on hearing of the occurrence and flung her arms round me, I had had a feeling of wonderful hope, but that sweetness was brief.

She was sorry for me, but what good did that do, when she was in love with another man?

My mother, unfortunately, had suspected long before this that something was wrong between Priscilla and myself. She had always an uncanny instinct, like the instinct of an animal, for anything that threatened my welfare. It was as if she smelt the change that came

gradually into my relationship with Priscilla. She would go sniffing round the house like a poor little worried dog. Her curiosity had been roused after Priscilla's illness, when I changed my room and installed myself across the corridor in a small apartment that I stripped of all useless furnishings such as curtains, carpets, and easy chairs. Sometimes I would come upon her standing miserably in the centre of the bare bedroom looking round her with bewildered, anxious eyes, her hands fluttering helplessly in the air before her. She dared not interfere, I had forbidden her to touch anything, but I could see that "my austerities" filled her with nervous dread, and an itching desire to disobey me would lure her again and again to the one place in the house that was outside her jurisdiction. At first she had argued and fussed.

"No carpet. But you must have a carpet, Simon."

"I do not want a carpet, Mother."

"You will catch your death of cold."

"Oh, no."

"And that small bed with that thin mattress, it's as hard as a stone."

"I like a hard bed, Mother."

"But it's not good for you, Simon, you can't rest properly."

"I know what's good for me, Mother."

"No, no, Simon, you don't. Let me change the mattress?"

"No, dear."

"You will at least have a fire in the evening?"

"No, thank you, Mother."

"Just a little fire, Simon. Jenny need not light it till ten o'clock. It will warm the room."

"I don't want the room warm, Mother."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, I don't understand, why are you so stern, Simon?"

"Warm rooms make me sleepy."

A look of terror came into her eyes. She would glance

apprehensively, with a kind of shrinking horror, at the priedieu in the corner, then back to me with a pitiful, imploring question in her poor, pretty face.

"Don't worry, Mother, dear."

"But I do, I do. Oh, why must you do it, Simon? I call it wicked, yes, I do, wearing yourself out like this. If you die I suppose God will be pleased, but I, how will I feel? You think of God always, never of me!" She began to whimper. I tried to reassure her, but suddenly she said:

"I'm surprised at Priscilla."

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"Surprised she lets you. After all, she's your wife. I'm only your mother, but she——"

"That will do, Mother. Priscilla and I understand each other."

"Yes, yes, I know what that means."

I was exasperated. "Mother, I beg you to leave this matter to me. Priscilla leaves my room alone. Pray do the same."

I am afraid that my mother never cared for Priscilla. She was very gentle, and too old-fashioned and orderly. Priscilla's noisiness irritated her, and her disorderly habits. My mother was always very particular about little details. She had a passion for perfection in housekeeping. It used to drive her nearly distracted to find the marks of Priscilla's muddy boots on the drawing-room carpet, her mackintosh flung over the banisters, her umbrella dripping beside the library hearth. Priscilla was very forgetful. She left her overshoes, her bundles, her letters, anywhere, and never knew where she had left them. Sometimes this led to difficulties, as my mother had a habit of locking up everything that she found lying about in a cupboard in the back hall.

She had never, however, allowed herself to find any fault with Priscilla, or show in any way her dislike of her tomboyish style, but at about this time she began to drop little

remarks criticising her. "What a pity it is that Priscilla has never learnt to walk on the balls of her feet instead of on her heels," or, "I do wish Priscilla would use the new scraper at the front door," and sometimes I would hear her asking Priscilla in tones that were sugary rather than sweet to please try to be back not more than half an hour late for luncheon, as it was so upsetting to cook.

Her resentment against Priscilla increased in proportion to my own ill-concealed apprehension. Her ill-temper flared up at the slightest sign on my part of nervousness. If I showed in any way that I was worried about Priscilla, she immediately reproduced in her manner to my wife a sort of caricature of the angry pain that I was trying to smother.

And I would hear her speaking the words, or a travesty of the words, that I was ashamed to utter. She had become an exaggerated and futile projection of myself, a feeble and grotesque shadow of the ugly thing that I was fast becoming.

"You seem to have no moral sense, Priscilla," I was startled to hear her say one day.

"What do you mean, Bunny?"

"About the awful goings on, I mean, of all the village girls with the soldiers, you seem to sympathise."

"I am sorry for them, certainly."

"Well, I don't see why you should feel any sympathy for abandoned girls, sunk in sin, as they are, and brazen about it, too, flaunting it in our faces, in Simon's face."

Priscilla, bewildered, turned to me.

"What do you say, Simon?" she asked. "Do you too think I've no moral sense, as Bunny says?"

I was taken unawares. I stammered. It seemed impossible, then, in my mother's presence, to explain the truth as I saw it. In some confused, indescribable way all truth I felt was being travestied, distorted, whether because of the war or only because of my own miserable obsession, I do not know.

There was the case of Jenny.

We were sitting one night after dinner in the library when Priscilla was summoned by Minchin.

"That Sands boy, your Ladyship, he's in the back hall."

Priscilla went out hurriedly. She came back a moment later and announced abruptly:

"Jenny's baby is dying."

I knew Jenny Sands, of course. My mother had taken her on for a time as second housemaid, a bright, pleasant girl who sang about her work and always put a bowl of flowers on my desk. She had a gift, I remember, for arranging flowers. Sands, the butcher, was a widower. He was doing well out of the war. He had ceased attending Church. There was a sister at home and two small boys. Jenny had been away a year or more. She had gone in service to the town.

I was startled by Priscilla's tone. I said:

"I didn't know that she had a baby. When was she married?"

"She isn't married."

"But I don't understand."

"That's just the point. She wants you to baptise the baby before it is too late."

"Too late?" I echoed stupidly.

"She came back to have it. Her sister took her in, but Sands is a brute. He refused at first to send for the doctor. He wanted to smuggle it away. He didn't want anyone to know, but of course everyone does know. They are all talking."

"You mean?"

Priscilla nodded.

"The man's been killed," she announced briefly.

The room seemed to go dark. A great wave of weariness, of discouragement, of unutterable sadness, engulfed me. Then I heard Priscilla say:

"Jenny's afraid the baby won't go to Heaven if it isn't

baptised. She wants you to come to-night. I saw her this afternoon. I stopped on my way back from the farm. I told Jenny to send word if it got worse. I told Jenny you'd come. I promised I'd get you there without Sands knowing. I can smuggle you in by the back. She's awfully set on your baptising it. It's such a duck of a baby, Simon. Jenny said she'd only seen the man two or three times, but that she was fond of the baby though she had had to pay such a lot for a bit o' fun."

"A bit of fun!"

"Yes," said Priscilla calmly, "that was the way she put it."

I looked at her. I looked at her with terror. Her face was stubborn. There was a little smile on her lips. She seemed all at once a complete stranger to me. I covered my face with my hands.

My mother began to whisper excitedly. She always whispered when she was excited.

"Oh, how dreadful. Oh, dear, how dreadful. A child of sin, born over the butcher's shop did you say, Priscilla? And I never knew. Why didn't we know, Simon?"

"Jenny only came back a week ago. She's been hiding," said Priscilla, in her deep voice that always sounded so very loud in contrast to my mother's whispering tone. "You'll come, won't you, Simon? I'll show you the way. I promised Jenny. Her father's away this evening. Mary will let us in."

"Hush, Priscilla," whispered my mother, "don't speak so loud. Think of the servants. Of course Simon can't go creeping out on the sly into the night to baptise a baby that's born in sin. The sins of the fathers shall be visited. Isn't it so, Simon?"

"That's all rubbish, Bunny," said Priscilla.

"Simon," wailed my mother, "Simon, do you hear?"

"Well, if it's a child of sin, then it needs baptising all the more." Priscilla gave a grim, dreadful little laugh. "Are you coming, Simon?"

I said yes, that I was coming. She went to get her mackintosh. My mother wailed that it was raining, that I would catch cold, that I would get my feet wet. I was too troubled and harassed to explain to either of them how far they both were in their different ways from an understanding of the mind of Christ.

The night was dark. Priscilla took my arm as we went out into the rain.

Strangely enough, as we slopped through the wet under my umbrella I was conscious of a feeling of comfort, almost of pleasure, and inconsequently I thought to myself :

"She is mine, my wife. It is good to walk through the rainy night with her, under this umbrella. No one can spoil this."

Searchlights played above us, wide bars of light spanning the sky above the rain, but the village street was close and dark. Small cracks of light showed at the windows and doors of the cottages. Vague figures lurched past us. A couple, locked together, huddled in a dripping doorway.

Mary Sands opened to us and led the way up the narrow stairs. We found Jenny sitting up in bed in a small, suffocating room over the shop. She had a shawl round her shoulders and was swaying backward and forward with her baby in her arms. A lighted candle stood on a table with a dirty cup and plate. We filled the room.

"God bless you, sir," said Jenny, and began to weep silently. Mary stood in the doorway listening, her face sullen. Sam's red head was poked in under her arm. He stared fascinated. Priscilla poured some water into a basin and picked up the baby, holding it a moment against her, a strange animal hunger in her face, then handed it to me. It was wound round in a tight bundle. Its tiny, bluish, waxen face was pinched like an old woman's. For an instant I thought that it was dead.

"It's all right, Simon," said Priscilla's deep voice.

I dipped my fingers in the basin.

"In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

The air in the room was stifling. A nauseating odour filled the space between the floor and the low, greasy ceiling, Priscilla gave the baby back to its mother. Jenny leaned against her pillows, among the untidy bedclothes, clutching it weakly, her tears streaming silently down. The candle-light flickered on her wet, exhausted face.

As I knelt by that bed to pray, the voices of drunken soldiers singing a loud and foolish song came up from the street.

"It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go."

"Sir, sir, you've done a kind deed this day," murmured Jenny as I rose from my knees. Priscilla bent over and kissed her on the forehead.

"Good-night, Jenny."

"Good-night, my lady."

"You're all right?"

"Oh, yes, my lady, only a bit tired." She closed her eyes. "I never thought," she murmured. "I didn't think o' this. I can't seem to remember how it was, but it don't matter now."

Mary stubbornly silent saw us out of the back door.

Priscilla was silent too until we reached our gate.

"Isn't it monstrous, Simon?" she asked then.

"What, Priscilla?"

"That she should have to pay so much?"

"She has been defiled, Priscilla," I said wearily. "She has defiled the temple of the Holy Ghost."

"Defiled? By having a baby? Simon, what do you mean?"

"Defiled by lust." Priscilla was silent again. We reached our door. She went in hurriedly and ran upstairs. My mother fluttered out into the hall. "Oh, dear, how wet you are, Simon. Your slippers are warming by the fire, darling, and I've made some hot toddy for you."

Suddenly I lost my temper. "I won't have it, Mother. Do leave me alone. All this fussing is ridiculous."

CHAPTER VI

CRAB was wounded in the autumn of 1917, and I who had been clinging to my faith like a man hanging by his fingers to a narrow ledge at a great height was dashed down into a drowning whirlpool of jealousy.

The ugly antics of my mind during this time I will faithfully describe.

The news reached us by telephone from Jericho Sands. My mother took the message that had been meant for Priscilla. Her ladyship wished Lady Birch to know that she had left for Boulogne with his lordship. Lord Willing was seriously wounded. Would Lady Birch please carry on? A manservant had given the message.

"Was that all?" asked Priscilla quietly. I remember how quiet she was.

My mother nodded. "Yes, that was all. He repeated the last bit about your carrying on. He said her ladyship said you would know."

"She means the ambulance centres," said Priscilla.

She gave no sign whatever of the panic that had clutched her. If her heart was being squeezed and pinched in her side, well, she did not cry out.

I watched her. I knew what she was feeling. I saw through her skin. I saw her heart pump, falter. I felt her going cold. I felt a shivering spread through her and felt her grit her teeth and stiffen her knees, and I read the thoughts in her mind. Her thoughts were concentrated on deceiving me.

"Simon must not suspect," she kept on repeating to herself.

"I suppose we'll hear details soon," said my mother conversationally.

"Yes."

"It's sure to be in the papers. His name certainly wasn't in the papers this morning. I always read the casualty lists most carefully."

Priscilla's head jerked upward. Her hand fumbled at her side, touching her woollen jersey. "And to think he was here," continued my mother, "not so long ago, having tea in this very room. I remember wondering at the time."

"Don't, Bunny," gasped Priscilla. I felt sorry for her. I could afford to feel sorry. I was convinced that Crab was going to die. I thought to myself, "He is probably dead already," and I felt an immense, unutterable relief. The image of Crab lying dead in a hospital bed filled me with peace, with loving kindness. I said gently, "Why don't you call up old Tweedle at the War Office. The A.P.M. will put you through."

The sudden light in her eyes made her face look the more ghastly. Such a pitiful masque it was, rigid, but hiding nothing. "Shall I?" she breathed. "Yes, do, Priscilla," I rejoined soothingly. I would be tender with her. I would prepare her. Compassionately I smiled down at her white lifted face. "Go now," I urged. I went to the door with her, helped her on with her coat, followed her to the garage. While she cranked up the car I thanked God for His great mercy and entrusted her to His care.

"You're a good sort, Simon," she said as she drove away.

She was gone a long time. When she came back she said, "They know nothing, except that he was wounded three days ago, and is in Base Hospital No. 1 at Boulogne."

She was out all the next day, and the next. "I've a lot to do," she explained. "I won't be back to lunch or tea." Each night when she came in there was the same question in her eyes, but she did not ask if there had been any message. On the fourth day my mother said to me at noon:

"There's a letter for Priscilla from France, from Base Hospital No. 1. The mark's on it. It came this morning

after she had gone. I put it on the mantelpiece in the library where she'd find it."

"You should have left it in the hall, Mother, on the stand."

"Oh, should I?" She blinked mysteriously.

"Certainly. Please put it back there."

"Of course, if you wish it."

"Never mind. I'll put it back myself." But I didn't, I left it there in order to see Priscilla when she opened it.

She was very late that evening and seemed very tired. It had been raining all day. Her face was blotchy with cold, her hair wet and stringy, her clothes steamed. She looked ugly and worn. I took pleasure in her ugliness.

"There's a letter for you, Priscilla."

"Where?"

"There."

She stretched out a numbed, reddened hand, looked a moment at the envelope, then opened it. Her face was turned away from me and lowered. I could not see it. I waited. I waited for the moan, the sob, the heart-broken whimpering sigh that would tell me what I already knew. I waited to take her in my arms, to lift her long, strong, exhausted body, I waited confidently for the tables to be turned, to have her in my power. I waited to hear and see and feel the suffering explode in her deep chest and well up through her mouth, her eyes, her finger tips. She would be mine again then, mine, given back to me. I would touch her hands, feel the pain in them, and find the way to her heart along her crying nerves. I would suffer with her. I would have her in my power. She would be helpless. I heard her say:

"It's from Crab's nurse. She says she is writing at his request to tell me his leg has been amputated at the knee, and that he's coming home."

There was a strange confusion in my head.

"What's that?" I kept repeating to myself. "What's that she's saying?"

" Shall I read you the letter, Simon ? "

" Yes, certainly ; no, never mind. Was that all ? "

" All but a joke, something about pelicans. ' He'll soon be feeding the pelicans again,' he says." Her voice was dreamy. She was speaking as if she were dreaming, as if she were floating away.

She stood there dripping and steaming on the hearthrug, in her belted mackintosh, her heavy boots, her battered hat, and I saw her soul go out of her and away, as plainly as if a ghost were gliding across the room and out of the window. The effect was equally uncanny. Only her shell was there. The ridiculous, uncouth clothes were empty. It was almost as if she had no face, as if between her collar and her hat there was nothing but air. I knew that if I spoke to her she would not hear. I was afraid to touch her lest my hand encounter space. Actually by the clock she was gone about two minutes, but it seemed an eternity, and in a way it was, for it was then, at that moment, that she found out and went to him, never to return. I worried this out of her long afterwards.

" When did you first know, Priscilla ? "

" Know ? "

" Know that you loved him ? "

" The day I got the letter from the hospital."

I didn't have to be told.

From that day on nothing could stop her, nothing could save her. She was like a person that is hypnotised.

I did not understand this at the time, I could not have admitted it to myself even had I understood it. But I do now. I see the thing in all its horror. I have fathomed the monstrous attraction there was between these two. I know exactly what it was ; in all its burning animal lust, I have tasted it, I have eaten it. It has been my daily bread for months. Bitter it has been in my mouth, sour and strong and thick as yeast, leaving an aftertaste that brings nausea still, but I know, oh, unspeakably what it must have tasted to them. For they were brutes,

hot-blooded, savage, cruel. Finely bred? What then? Under their calm, smooth surface they were wild beasts I say, she as well as he; a she-lion she was, going to her mate, running, her nose to the ground, hot on the scent of his wounded tracks.

She has admitted to me, I tortured it out of her, that she went straight to his arms the day she first went to see him in his nursing home in London. I can see her do it. I can see her stride in quickly, and quickly kneel down, and all in one smooth, swift movement sink into his embrace. There was no hesitation, no pause in the doorway, no stammering for words, no questioning glance. He knew that she was coming. She came. They forgot the nurses, she said. She did not know whether anyone saw, she did not care. His leg, the other one, not the amputated one, was in a sort of sling, tied up with pulleys. There were a lot of ropes and things about. He could only move his head and shoulders and arms. He was still weak. There was sweat on his forehead. She noticed after a bit that his hair was grey.

She did not think of me. She did not think of anything. It did not occur to her, she said, that she was doing anything wrong. She didn't think of herself as doing anything. It all seemed perfectly right, perfectly natural. She had a very vivid, exact sense of having always been with him. She had always been his, he had always been hers. I didn't count. No one, nothing counted.

Lady Sidlington came in after a time and asked her to spend the night with her in town. They went out together when the nurse came back, and sent me a wire.

She came home the following day, announced briefly that she had seen Crab, who was getting on all right, and took up the routine of her life as if nothing of importance had happened. During the next two months she went regularly every Thursday to London. Beyond that there was no change in her habits, and in herself a change so subtle that though I spent hours and days and many a sleepless night trying to decipher it, I could not make out its meaning.

It is important to keep quite distinctly in mind that at this time I knew, for a certainty, nothing, I merely suspected. Priscilla had neither said nor done anything that was definitely a proof of her guilt. Everything that she had done was innocent enough if one wanted to argue that way, and I did want to, terribly. Again and again I would explain to myself that she could not be guilty because she was so above board in her actions. "If she were in love with him," I would plead to this other Simon who was tormenting me, "she would not say straight out that she was going to town to see him. She would invent another excuse. The very fact that she announces her intentions each time she goes is a proof that there is nothing in it but friendship." And I would go over the whole story of her friendship with Crab from the beginning, enumerating carefully and triumphantly the number of times she had met him. Once at Jericho Sands three years ago, three times during that week when he came home on leave two years later, once here at Creech, once outside the post office at Exminster, and once in town for luncheon. Now after another year had elapsed she had gone up to see him in the nursing home three or four times in a month, once a week to be exact. And during all this period they had not written to each other, I was certain of this. Surely if she were in love with him and he with her they would have written to each other.

Eagerly I championed her against myself.

"She is incapable of lying," I would reiterate again and again. "Can you imagine her lying? Has deceit any possible part in her? No. Well then?"

But my jealousy though downed for the moment would bound up again as soon as I let go my hold. "She doesn't lie, but, on the other hand, she says very little, suspiciously little. What do you make of her silence? Why is she so uncommunicative? If this is friendship, then it is a very peculiar and unique friendship. She never did this for any of her other friends, and nearly all the men she knows

have been wounded. As for her not writing, isn't the very fact that she rushes to him after such a long silence, and when, as you say, she has only in all her life since she was a child seen him two or three times, the most significant thing about the whole business? If they do care and can care so much for each other as to go on thinking of one another so intensely without even having news of one another, then you Simon are 'up against' something that you have every reason to fear."

"But," I would reply, "you argue on the basis of a consummate duplicity of which I insist that she is incapable. Her nature is open, frank, intolerant of all meanness." And the whole argument would begin again and go on and on till my head ached and my heart grew tired of its interminable restlessness.

I had hours of respite from sheer exhaustion. There were days when I had not the energy to suffer or argue or even to think. I would sink into a feeble passivity and gentleness. It was in one of these moods that resembled a kind of craven resignation that I noted the essential quality of the change in her. It was quite simply that she was no longer nervous. She was indifferent to me. She was no longer in the least afraid of me or anything that I could do to her. She did not avoid me any more, nor did she, on the other hand, seek me out. When I joined her she did not look at me with apprehension. Her manner was casual, serene, kind, but uninterested. She was very absent-minded. Often when I spoke to her she did not hear me, and would give a start when I repeated my question, and apologise—"I'm so sorry, I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

So the winter dragged on, the last dark, desperate winter of the war, the last black, icy months of the harvest of death when men were mowed down like fields of corn; grey, blizzard-swept fields, I saw them growing miraculously in a night, new crops of iron-hooded men ready for the reaping guns, men sprouting thick and quick as mushrooms out of chill and shiny mud, planted thick for death, young

and old men, all the men of England, mushroom food, cannon-fodder for the glorious war.

Crab was moved down to Jericho Sands in March. The Moones had turned the south wing of the house into a hospital. Lady Sidlington was in charge there, Priscilla informed me, and would like to come over to Creech sometimes for a rest. Puss Featherstone, too, wanted to come down to us. She was home on sick leave, quite done up by her ambulance work in Flanders.

I acquiesced supinely in these arrangements.

I know now that I was right to fear Lady Sidlington and Puss Featherstone. Would that I had barred my house to them. They made the way of sin easy for Priscilla and pleasant, and the evil that they stood for they made appear normal and beautiful in her eyes. Even upon me they had their effect. I am surprised by the quantity of worldly knowledge that I imbibed from my association with them, and by the subtlety with which I seem to understand them, but I remember what a sickening process of initiation it was. Indeed I had during those months when Willing was convalescing at Jericho Sands and Priscilla's two friends invaded my house, the kind of feeling that I had as a child when an evil-minded boy told me unclean stories. I experienced the same shameful curiosities, the same horrible sickness of knowledge. For what I learnt of these women was vile, was nothing but evil.

Lady Sidlington came frequently for Sunday, motoring over from Jericho Sands. Puss Featherstone settled down on us at Creech for a month. She came, it appeared, to be near Crab. When I asked Priscilla how long Puss was going to honour us with her presence, she answered, "I don't know. She's in love with Crab."

And the extraordinary thing is that her words actually for the time being deluded me, lulled me, contained somehow a sedative. I had loathed the idea of having the girl in the house, now suddenly I welcomed her presence. If that was what brought her, then she might somehow save

us. Let her stay, by all means. I might be able to use her. I concealed these feelings, however, and showed a becoming incredulity.

"That's the reason she went out to France," Priscilla added.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, she means to marry him."

I stared at her extremely puzzled. I am puzzled even now. In this instance I do not know what to make of her. I am at a loss to explain. The easiest explanation, namely, that she was trying to hide behind her friend, does not satisfy me. It does not fit in. I am forced rather to the conclusion that she was, as she would put it, playing up, that she was giving Puss her chance. Her peculiar sense of honour would work that way.

It is all very peculiar. Now that I look back I see that Priscilla actually withdrew to give Puss room. With Crab nearby she made no effort to see him. She did not go over to Jericho Sands. Puss went without her. Although Lady Moone repeatedly asked for her, asked for us both in fact, and from this I knew how insistent Crab was, Priscilla always said she was too busy to go. She went steadily on with her farming and her ambulance work, arranged significantly to meet Lady Moone when necessary at Exminster, not at Jericho Sands, and when Puss said, "Do come with me, Priscilla, Crab asked me to bring you," she would reply shortly, "Awfully sorry, Puss, but I simply can't get away," and that was that.

As for Puss, she had wangled her leave, she told me, and had no intention of going out again at present. What went on at the front was no longer any concern of hers I gathered, now that Crab was at home.

She was an indecently frank young woman. She made no bones about her purpose in coming to Creech.

"I adore Crab," she once said to me," and I intend that he shall adore me. He doesn't yet, but he will. I'll make him. You watch me."

Lady Sidlington's visits were less easy to explain. Indeed I cannot explain them. I have never understood the friendship between Priscilla and this spoiled, sophisticated woman. I don't see what she found in Priscilla to attract her. Her connection with the Moones puzzles me too. She was very intimate with all the family, but she was Crab's friend. Puss, who called her darling and sweetest whenever they met, but who didn't really like her at all, suggested that her intimacy with Crab had been a very great intimacy indeed. "Oh, yes," she answered to my question, with a wicked grin, "Peg and Crab were once very great friends, the greatest, but that's all ancient history." I never knew just what she meant, but her manner troubled me. Why did Lady Sidlington come over to see Priscilla? What strange secret understanding was there between them? I do not know, I cannot make out. I only know that at first she charmed me as she did every one and that I was a dozen times on the verge of opening all my unhappy heart to her.

How could I tell what she really was? I had never met anyone like her before. She was a lovely woman. I thought her good. She would sit with my mother and myself by the fire in the evening knitting socks as industriously as any farmer's wife. Though she looked very fragile and was extremely thin, she was a most sprightly and pleasant companion and would ask my mother endless questions about the price of butter and eggs and the little details of housekeeping that were my mother's hobby.

Puss told me that Lady Sidlington's career in the war had been somewhat "hectic." She had spent a year at Guy's Hospital in London and had then taken a unit to France and had established a hospital near Boulogne, but the authorities hadn't appreciated the effort at all. "She was too demoralising, you know, to the army. It fell in love with her. They were afraid she would stop the war, but they couldn't get her out. She wheedled the generals too successfully. The Red Cross could do nothing, and of

course her hospital was quite a good show really. Too many people came there who weren't wounded, that was all. Finally, one poor man overstayed his leave. He was court-martialled. There was an awful row. Peggy was sent home after that. She was awfully cut up about it, but she ought to have known better. She'd be out of a job now if it weren't for Violet Moone. Most matrons won't have her around. She works hard enough, but there's her face to reckon with. It gets in her way. Men are fools."

I could understand why. I remember even now how she would bend her beautiful head and lower her eyes as I talked to her and smile while the dimples came in her cheeks. No doubt she was laughing at me. No doubt she thought me very pathetic, very queer, though sometimes I found her great eyes fixed on me with a puzzled scrutiny.

However, that is neither here nor there. It is of no importance whether I interested her or not, or whether she exercised her wiles on me merely for her own perverse amusement or in order to aid and abet Priscilla. The point is that she did become Priscilla's ally, and that even then, slowly and insidiously, she was destroying Priscilla's moral fibre.

I can see now that her easy langour and her natural laziness and good humour were the proof of a sensual and self-indulgent nature, and that the peculiar, flowerlike quality of her beauty was a shell to cover a spirit exquisitely refined in vice. But I did not know this then. Indeed I enjoyed having her in the house, and when she drove over from Jericho Sands demurely wrapped in her nurse's cape, her sweet thin face framed by her close bonnet, I would run out to the front door to meet her with a cordiality that I felt for no one else. Often she brought people with her, friends of hers, who seemed to know Priscilla, officers on leave, convalescents or wounded. Sometimes politicians accompanied her, the criminals responsible for the war, and all of these I welcomed, such was the witchery of her wavy hair, and I would change into flannels and join in

the tennis I played so badly. I must have made myself ridiculous. Knowing what I know now, my cheeks blaze. She was as bad as Puss Featherstone, worse. Many of the men she brought down here were her lovers, one at least, they called him Jock, he was in the Government. How many more? All perhaps. Neither she nor Puss had any moral sense whatever. They were what is called in the world "free spirits," that is abandoned women. They had drifted so far from innocence as to no longer know the difference between right and wrong. They never asked themselves, is this right? Ought I to do this? But—is it fun?

Yet Lady Sidlington would walk across to the church with me on Sunday mornings and kneel devoutly in her pew and sit with rapt face through the service, thinking libidinous thoughts, no doubt, as I preached, allowing her fancy to flit from scene to scene of wild, unlicensed pleasure as I read from the Holy Scriptures.

Gradually I came to fear her.

She seemed to have had, like Priscilla, no education. I have heard her say sweetly that at home she had never been thought worth the expense of a good school, yet she gave the impression of being very wise and appeared to be on intimate terms, not only with our leading statesmen but with such eminent scholars as Kitson and Jenks of Cambridge. When I expressed surprise at this she answered flippantly, "Oh, but I like old men." Her old men as she called them sent her books, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings. She left them strewn about the house. She had friends in Paris, too, who sent her books. I came on one, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, it was called, and read a few pages. They sparkled like ice. The deadly poison they contained was frozen into a surface of diabolical beauty. She apologised lightly for leaving it in the library. "It's an eighteenth century thing, a classic you know." She seemed amused at the thought of my reading it. That little episode gave me my first inkling of her real character.

Though they were both very polite and gave me a very careful attention when I talked to them, I came to realise gradually that neither of them cared in the least what impression they made on me. Puss would pull out her lipstick at the table and smear her wide mouth with scarlet, making a face into her hand mirror. Often they would forget I was there and talk medicine or surgery with an appalling professional preciseness of detail that made me squirm in my chair. Enthusiastically they would argue about drains, syringes, hot airbeds, whatever they are, or the value of 666 for gangrene, "a disinfectant much used before the war," Puss explained blandly, "for syphilis." On other occasions they would talk strange gossip, these alarming ladies of quality, in choppy phrases that I found difficult to follow. Izzy had bolted with Bobby. If Molly's baby wasn't a boy the title would go to Squeak. Coo-coo was making a fortune in wedding dresses for war widows. The K.T. Club was very amusing. It had been raided last week. Doodle Durham, awfully tight, had made a speech to the police. I listened to all this with horror and bewilderment, but Priscilla seemed perfectly at her ease. She knew all about the Carroll treatment and the latest apparatus for fractured thighs. She was, it appeared, specially interested in facial surgery and was awfully impressed by the work that was being done at Roehampton in reconstructing jaws and noses. Also she found the picture of Doodle Durham haranguing the police with a bottle of champagne in his hand, funny and she let her two friends talk on and on about the war, though she knew well enough that the topic was taboo at my table. There was underneath her calm and casual manner a note of defiance. Every morning now she would listen while Puss read out grimly the names of men whom she knew from the list of killed, wounded or missing.

"Bobby Trevelyan. Lieutenant J. Cruikshank. That's Squeak's younger brother. Three out of one family. Oh, God, there's the Ogre, poor old Ogre, so fat and jolly, I

loved him. Lord, how he used to make me laugh. George Bowater has been missing a month now, but Mary won't believe he's been killed. Captain Geoffrey Tweedle, 18th Lancers; that any relation of Old Bill's, Priscilla?"

"Yes, his nephew; no, great nephew. Only a baby. He used to come here. Do you remember him, Simon?"

Of course I remembered him. A merry boy with curly eyelashes and a bloom of peaches on his cheeks.

This sort of thing became unbearable. I suspected them of doing it on purpose. Puss, I knew, despised me, and always had. I remembered her behaviour during Priscilla's illness and how she had burst into my study and shouted at me to stop praying and send to London for a specialist. Even Lady Sidlington's light touch seemed now to carry a threat. When I asked her one day how her husband was, she said, "I don't know I'm sure. He has a soft job somewhere. I never see him any more."

I took to avoiding them. We separated at the door of the dining-room. I went to my study, they into the garden or to the music-room. I would hear their laughter, tunes banged on the piano, running feet going upstairs. Doors would slam. Someone would shout, "Coming. Wait a jiffy, I've lost my clubs." And presently they would swing past my windows, healthy amazons in sweaters and stout boots, golf bags slung on their strong shoulders. No one seeing them like that in their country clothes would have known them for what they were, depraved and vicious women, given up to every kind of sensual excess.

It took Puss Featherstone six weeks to find out about Crab and Priscilla.

It is strange. They do not appear to have talked about Crab Willing at all, or to have told each other anything, those three. Priscilla told me long afterwards when I cross-questioned her that she and Lady Sidlington did not discuss things.

"Yet she knew?"

"Yes."

"And you knew that she knew?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't exchange confidences?"

"No."

"You mean to tell me you both took it all for granted?"

"Yes."

"As a matter of course."

"I suppose so. You may put it that way."

"You weren't curious, nor she?"

"No. There's a decency——"

I was to believe in her decency.

Puss, on the other hand, knew nothing. She had followed Crab to France, had driven an ambulance for two years in Flanders, and had been rewarded by an occasional meeting with him in some disordered bombarded town behind the lines. Then she had found him in the evacuating hospital at Poperinghe, had driven him to Boulogne and had got herself sent home a month or so after his arrival in London.

And Priscilla said nothing to enlighten her. She was dumb. And Peggy Sidlington, who chattered so much and so easily, kept her secret.

I can remember the three of them sitting in the garden together, Peggy Sidlington in the hammock, Puss on the ground, Priscilla slouching in a basket chair. The smoke from their cigarettes curls up. Lady Sidlington's long idle foot dangles a slipper, Puss digs a hole in the lawn with a pointed stick, Priscilla scratches her terrier's ears. They talk little. Their voices are low, monotonous, sleepy. I watch them from my window. I listen. They are talking of uninteresting things in jerky, bored phrases. Priscilla chuckles. Puss jabs viciously at the ground. Lady Sidlington yawns. They behave more like men than women, yet how beautiful they are, how infinitely attractive. Not one of them makes any reference to the man about whom they are all thinking. The dog jumps down off Priscilla's lap. He is off after a squirrel. No, he keeps on past the

oak towards the pond. There is a squawking and fluttering. "Hi there, Blinkers, stop it I tell you." Priscilla puts her fingers in her mouth, let's out her ear-splitting whistle, is after him, running. I want to run too into the sunshine and chase down to the pond, to laugh, to feel the wind in my face. I want to take their hands and shout and be friends. I want to be one of them, one with them. They draw me. They tempt me. They fill me with envy. They flaunt before me the beautiful banner of their freedom, their immoral, ungodly freedom. They are strong, complete, cruel and beautiful, oh, so beautiful, all three are beautiful in the same way. They have a mysterious charm. They possess between them a strange talisman, what is it? The secret of life? Is it that? Whatever it is, it is potent, it has a magic, and I have missed it, I am missing it now as I peer timidly after them out of the window.

I turn back to my table. I have my sermon to write for next Sunday. The room seems dark. There is no life in it. It is like a tomb, a dead place. The MSS. of my unfinished book is piled on a chair. It is weeks, months, since I have touched it. The sight of it fills me with loathing. I take up a packet of the laboriously written pages and begin to tear at it feverishly. The paper is tough, I go on tearing.

My mother came in to find the floor littered. "What have you done, Simon? What have you done?" she whispered, terrified.

"Clear all this away, clear it away, it is rubbish, rubbish," I cried frantically.

They destroyed my work, they have destroyed my life, these people. They have ended by destroying my soul. Priscilla did it, Priscilla and her friends.

CHAPTER VII

ONE afternoon Crab motored back with Puss from Jericho Sands. I heard him stumping through the hall on his crutches and remained out of sight in my study. His arrival was like a sign in the Heavens, a portent of impending calamity. I leaned up against the door in a kind of faintness. I remembered feeling like this once before when the doctors told me that they did not know whether Priscilla was going to live or not. Now I knew that if I went out and saw Crab and Priscilla together I would find out at last, finally, whether or not they were lovers. I dared not face the issue.

So long as he had kept away I could breathe and argue with myself and delude myself. Now with his great bulk in the house and his voice booming out Priscilla's name as if he had a right to it, all my carefully builded subterfuges went crumbling down round me, but still I clung to the débris. I did not want to know. I could not bear to know. Rather this sick suspense than a final irrefutable knowledge. His coming to Creech unbidden and after so many repeated rebuffs was a sign of his passion for her as categorical and neat as the Q.E.D. of a geometrical problem, but it did not in itself prove her to be his accomplice. I could still hope that it was all on his side. I could begin again to hypothesize a situation in which he was guiltily on fire while she remained innocently cool. And even as I leaned against the door, clawing it feebly from nervousness, while I heard her saying his name on a note of joyous surprise, I began to do this, collecting hurriedly together in my mind a new set of little extenuating facts, namely that she had kept away from him, that she had refused repeatedly to go over there, that she had not even gone to the telephone when he

called up, and so on, and I heard Puss announcing that he had insisted on bringing her back, now that he was able to get about a little. There it was. It was he alone who was the culprit. I could rage against the brute and still believe in Priscilla.

Priscilla said, "Leg getting on well?" in her brusque way.

"Right as rain," he replied. What ridiculous language they all used, and then Puss again, "Not as right as all that, he can't stand his new one yet."

Ah! I drew a long breath at the image their words called up of his mutilated limb. Priscilla would never take a lover with a swollen stump, no, never. She could not cleave to a man who flaunted such a hideous scar. She would pity him, admire him, hero-worship him, but it was impossible that she should be enamoured of him.

Listening behind a closed door to Priscilla's voice, that was the first time I did it, but not spying then, no shame that time save the shame of cowardice. I was afraid of him. I had suffered so much through thinking about him that I knew his presence would let loose all the accumulated hatred and suspicion that I had been hoarding up in my mind. If I went out to join them I would give myself away. I must not, whatever happened, give myself away yet. I must think out some plan, some means of dealing with him, I must consider taking Priscilla away. I might write to him and ask him not to see her again. I might request him to meet me in town for an interview.

I heard them go out into the garden. I did not look out as they passed my window, but I could not help looking after a little as I sat at my desk. I saw the stump of his leg with the trouser folded round it, sticking out from the chair he had lowered himself into on the lawn, and the top of his head that was grey and his hat and crutches lying on the grass. I saw Priscilla and Puss sitting on either side of him. I saw enough. I had the pleasure of seeing these objects twice. He came once again, and then suddenly

after his second visit Puss announced that she was leaving us.

That night, passing the door of Priscilla's room on my way to bed, I heard voices and stopped and listened for the second time, this time spying. Priscilla and Puss were talking. I heard Puss say, "Anyway, I'm off to-morrow."

"But why, Puss?" Priscilla asked.

"You know why, Priscilla."

"I don't. I wish you wouldn't."

"He doesn't care for me, I tell you, and he never will. After all, why should he? I'm not good enough. I'm shop-soiled. He knows that."

"Nonsense."

"It's true. Don't be a fool, and don't fib to me, my dear. Why tell each other lies? But I did care. I'd like you to believe that if you please. It wasn't just the money and all the rest of it, though God knows I wanted that badly enough. Perhaps at first I didn't care so very much. Damn little I suppose really. But later, out there, when he was so tired and grubby and hadn't had a shave or a decent meal or slept in a bed for days, I did then. I dressed up in a soldier's kit once and got through the lines in the Ypres salient and found his dug-out. There was an awful noise going on. The guns made a terrible row. He kissed me that day, and hugged me. It was all dark and smelly. I thought I'd tell you, that was all. He was awfully nervy and jumpy. We hugged each other and laughed. That is he laughed and said I was a brick and awfully kind to come. He never spoke of it afterwards. Seemed to have forgotten. I nearly got caught. Had a narrow shave. So that's that, my dear."

Priscilla murmured something I did not catch. Puss answered in a particular distinct tone:

"Don't be a fool, Priscilla. No one can see you together and not know. He simply never takes his eyes off your face. So don't bother to lie to me, and do, for God's sake, my dear, be careful."

I did not wait to hear any more.

It is easy to say after the event, "You should have done this or that. Had you taken a strong line and forbidden her to see him, this would not have happened; or the reverse, had you trusted her and left her alone she would have come to her senses, your confidence in her would have touched her and made her ashamed," but I had no friend wise in the ways of the world to advise me. I did not know what to do.

I stumbled back to my room that night, and creeping into it like a thief, closed the door carefully, then leant panting with my back up against it. "You are a cad and a sneak," I whispered audibly, and burst into violent, soundless sobbing. All my childhood came over me then with an awful vividness. It was there round me, fresh and green, in my room. Everything that I had loved and believed in as a small boy bubbled up in my diseased, stricken heart, every ideal of conduct that I had been taught at school. Once we had caught a sneak eavesdropping, his ear to a keyhole. I remembered horribly how we had hounded him out of the form. "Phipps Minor is a sneak," we had scrawled on the wall over his bed in the dormitory. He had been an outcast. I was that boy, I, Simon, son of Edward Birch. My father's face rose before me, cold, distant. He had been a dry, supercilious man and he had had a poor opinion of me. He had died during my first year at Eton. Wildly I longed to be back there in that young brutal world where justice was swift, where I could give myself up, take a hiding, be publicly disgraced and have done with it.

For me there was no such relief. I was a man, a Christian, a man of God, and responsible to Him the Most High alone.

I could not face Him. Frantically I sought for a means of escape from Him. I would leave Creech, I would give up the living, I would leave the Church, excommunicate myself. I was not fit to preach the Word of God. I would take Priscilla away. My mind boiled with violent decisions

that evaporated like bad-smelling gas to hang over me in a sickly cloud.

That night was the first of many nights of utter spiritual darkness, and when the day came I did nothing, nothing that is but pray, and my prayers, inasmuch as they were never answered, must have been futile. No doubt they were dishonest.

The prayer of a righteous man! But I was not righteous, I was a cad, and desperately weary of my life, and yet I began again to argue that I was justified in listening at my wife's door, since I had learned that way something important. My shame dwindled. The words I had heard sounded endlessly in my head, with a teasing, exasperating insistence. "No one can see you together without knowing. He never takes his eyes off your face." I had only done a little sly thing. Priscilla was guilty of a monstrous sin. Was she or wasn't she? "For God's sake my dear, be careful!" What did that mean? How far had things gone between Crab and Priscilla? Was it already too late? How was I to find out? If I questioned Priscilla she would lie.

Puss had gone. Lady Sidlington too had disappeared. Crab did not come back. Priscilla went on with her life. She was silent. The house was silent. An unnatural stillness pervaded it. No one whistled or stamped about any more. No one banged out tunes on the piano. The summer was dying. The garden was dusty, the flowers drooped, faded, drab and soiled. A sickly haze hung over the hills. The guns boomed from the gun ranges across the river.

I cringed before Priscilla. I avoided her, although she was more kind and friendly than usual, and seemed worried about me. I avoided the house. I took to roaming the country. I spent long hours in the woods, flat on my face on the ground, but in the midst of my misery I would begin wondering what she was doing. Had she gone to meet him? Was she with him at that moment? Where?

What was she saying to him and he to her? I would jump to my feet, seized with an intolerable spasm of curiosity, hurry home, rush into the house, and then, if I found that she was there I would slink out of her sight.

I had a desperate craving to talk to someone. I thought if only I could tell some friend about this, he would show me how unreasonable I am.

But the only intimate friend I had in the neighbourhood was Beckitt. He was the Wesleyan Minister in Stonetown, the mining village across the hills. He had sought me out because of my pacifist opinions. We had a good deal in common, in fact the whole of Christ's Gospel, for he was a simple and holy man, but though I could pray with him for the people of England who were lost in ungodliness and savagery I could not talk to him of my wife. His own family life was too different from mine. His wife came from Glasgow. She was constantly in the family way. They had ten children and were very poor. It was not their poverty that made the difference between us but a certain roughness of manner and boisterous untidiness about them. Beckitt did not always shave. His collar was not as a rule very clean. He praised God for multiplying his seed but seemed to take little notice of his children.

He would say, "Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not neither do they spin. Leave the washing up, Jeany, and come and read a chapter with us." His philosophy was "Take no thought for the morrow," and I fear that his boys and girls would have gone unclothed had the neighbours been less charitable. My mother, though she did not at all like Mrs. Beckitt, sent her, at my bidding, coals and warm clothing and many a basket of vegetables, and Beckitt would praise the Lord for answering his prayers with these mercies, but Priscilla, who loathed him, called him a cadger and said the Lord had nothing whatever to do with it. I did not tell her of the occasional five pound note I gave him.

He wasn't at all her type of person of course, but to do

her justice she had put up with him for my sake, asking both him and his wife to dinner every now and then and refraining from comment on the noisy way he ate his soup and the blackness of his finger-nails, until one winter evening she met me by chance on my bicycle at our gate and noticed that I hadn't got my coat on and asked me what I had done with it. I am afraid I looked rather shamefaced when I admitted that I had given it away, it being a very wet, cold day with a raw wind blowing, to Beckitt who didn't have one. I can see her now standing in the wet windy drive with the sodden leaves whirling round her and the wind lashing the great pinetree that towered behind her, and I can hear her cry out, half laughing, yet angrily affectionate, "Simon, you blessed, blessed idiot, how could you be such a fool?" And with that she hustled and bustled me home, scolding and abusing me in a kindly yet fierce manner, and forcing me to drink a whole glass of boiling hot toddy when we got to the house. But though she laughed she could not stand the sight of Beckitt after that. And much as I admired him for the way he laboured among the hard-headed, hard-drinking, sport-loving miners, much as I valued his hearty religious fervour, I could not mention Priscilla's name to him, that was impossible.

There was old William Tweedle. I might have gone to him, but I did not trust him. Although he had been my father's greatest friend and had known me ever since I was born, I knew he was far more fond of Priscilla than he was of me. Indeed I felt certain that he had disapproved of my marriage from the beginning. How then could I go to him with the tale of my fears? I imagined myself going to town and looking him up at the War Office, or walking down the road to his cottage on one of the Sundays when he had leave, pushing open the gate and being shown by his plump housekeeper into the back garden where he would be weeding his flower beds. "Priscilla is in love with Crab Willing. What shall I do?" I imagined him, getting up, dusting his knees, turning his grizzled face on

me, with those piercing, quizzical eyes of his twinkling under their spiky brows. I imagined a smile in them, a gleam, a look that said—"Serves you right, young man. You'd no business to marry her, she's too good for you."

No, I couldn't go to him. Worldly advice he no doubt had tucked away about his capacious person in plenty, but sympathy and true understanding for me, none. He was too ribald, too well-fed, too hardened an old sinner to grasp the peculiar fine-drawn agony of my position. There had never been anything in his own experience, I felt sure, that could be useful to me. Something of a gay dog he had been, many years before, they said, but more addicted to the bottle than to women. Old port and old books were his two weaknesses. He had a cellar full of the first and a fair collection of the second, though nothing in the way of a library to compare with our own at Creech. One of the Tweedles of Doone in our county, he had been a younger son of that impoverished family and had lived high on a very modest income during his youth, riding a smart cob in the Row during the days of Queen Victoria, being welcome in all the big houses where the food and wine were good. They had put him then into the diplomatic service. He had been abroad more or less for twenty years and had at last retired in his old age to the country to pay off his debts by a series of publications, slim, sardonic volumes of essays on men and books which I never read but which my father spoke of with friendly appreciation. Such a man, though he might know a deal of human nature, could not inspire me with confidence. His advice when I had asked for it had never been to my liking. In this case he was capable of saying—"Let her go, man, let her go. What do you want with a wife anyway?" Or if not that, something worse to the effect that the only possible course for a man in my position was to pretend to be blind, or again, worst of all and most likely, he would burst out at me angrily and tell me to hold my tongue and not come whining to him with tales of my wife. He was great

on what he called the common decencies and had never been willing to discuss Priscilla.

Such considerations made it impossible for me to go to him, though I itched to sound him, and if not get advice and sympathy at least obtain some information from him, for what I most feared was what most impelled me to approach him, namely that Priscilla had already told him something of her case, and that Crab too had been to him, and that he already knew far more than I did of what was going on, and might even be playing the part of a go-between to the two of them.

I am sure now that I was correct in some of these surmises. I cannot be certain that Priscilla at this early stage confided in him, nor can I actually accuse him of aiding and abetting the two in their criminal conduct, but I do know that he knew, long before I did, what they were planning, and I am certain that more than once they used his cottage as a meeting place, both when he was there and when he was not there. Mrs. Pinch, who always attended church twice on Sundays and dropped me such obsequious curtsies, must have been in their secret and their pay. She, at any rate, is guilty in the plainest sense of the word of scheming and plotting against me. I've no doubt Crab made it well worth her while. She must have tucked away many a banknote in that black satin apron pocket of hers.

There remained Lady Agatha. She was still in her lodgings at Exminster near the training camp, where she had been working all through the war. We had seen very little of her. She seemed to have forgotten us. Occasionally I heard from her. She wrote that she was very busy, that the war seemed to have opened men's hearts to Christ's message, that the evening services in the camp were wonderful, that the dear boys who were going out seemed so to enjoy the hymn-singing and were so grateful, so touched by any little kindness. She had given away twenty-five thousand New Testaments and a hundred thousand copies of the Gospel of St. John. She had had

many letters from the front. One lad had written her that his Testament had stopped a piece of shrapnel. He had carried it in his waistcoat pocket. She asked me to come over to Exminster and take some prayer meetings. "I understand so well how you feel, dear Simon. I think I envy you the stand you have taken. It is a blessed thing to be reviled and persecuted for Christ's sake, but I seem to have been led by the dear Lord to serve Him during this terrible time in a very humble capacity. No one notices me here. At first they laughed at me and my bicycle, but now they've got used to me. I am as happy as one can be these days. Give darling Priscilla my love."

I had not taken the prayer meetings. The army chaplains had objected to my doing so, of course, but I had been over once or twice to see her and each time had come away refreshed and invigorated. Truly Lady Agatha was wonderfully endowed with grace. She lived in two very untidy and stuffy rooms over a grocer's shop. A mass of books and papers stood in corners, on tables, on chairs in her sitting-room. Soiled tea-cups stood about. She explained that she never had time to clean up properly. She had her lunch and supper at the canteen, she said. She looked very tired. Her clothes were even shabbier than usual. Her skirts were muddy round the bottom, her shoes broken down. She was radiant. Her long, sensitive face shone with that inner light of the spirit that comes from a happy intimacy with the Divine Father. We prayed together, then went out and had tea in an A.B.C. shop. She asked affectionately after Priscilla, but without any great interest. She had no curiosity about what was going on either in the world or in my household. Having handed Priscilla over to me, she had ceased worrying about her. She trusted the Lord and went where He led her. She was very detached. I could see that she really enjoyed living as she was living. She was free. It was a great relief to her to have no house, no home, no material responsibilities. "I just lock my door and put my key

in my pocket. Sometimes I don't lock it, I forget." She laughed. "There's nothing to steal but Gospels. I don't mind how many they take of those. The Son of Man had no place to lay His head, but I have a very good bed, you know, and that's all I need."

Now I hesitated to go to her. How could I tell her that the child she had given into my care was in deadly peril, was perhaps already involved in a most hideous sin? I longed ardently, as a man parched with thirst longs for water, for the relief of confession. I thought of her as of some grand and aged priestess to whom I could pour out the story of my own lapse from faith. But how could I tell her of my own plight and describe to her the awful spiritual darkness that had closed over me without explaining to her its cause?

I still had enough self-respect left, and enough of what Tweedle prized so highly, common decency, not to be willing to tell tales on Priscilla to her own mother. And yet who could help us if she did not? Wasn't it after all Lady Agatha's business to know what her daughter was doing? What would she think if she heard? Wouldn't she hold me accountable?

The fact was that she never heard anything, and never noticed what was going on around her. When she came to Creech she was vague, absent-minded, childishly pleased. Priscilla would take her round the garden, show her the farm, her ambulance centre, introduce her to the farm girls and village children, and Lady Agatha would beam at them all indiscriminately, bending her long, gentle head forward and down, peering short-sightedly at potatoes or beets or setter puppies, or into the blurred faces of people that were all so kind, and seemed so fond of Priscilla, and would go away contentedly, to forget her child for weeks and months at a time.

Her innocence made her invulnerable. I dared not tell her, not yet. I had not yet arrived at the point where I could no longer hide the truth from her.

CHAPTER VIII

AND so, by depriving me of all human sympathy, God led me to Himself and back into the heart of that Heavenly solitude, outside of which I was like a dog or some mean animal gone astray. I crawled back, and prostrated myself at His feet. There at last, after many days of fasting and prayer, I found peace. By the starving of my body the noisome vapours of my mind were dispersed. I experienced a blessed sense of release, of lightness, I entered into an exquisite non-corporeal existence. God appeared to me then and spoke to me, and forgave me my sins and reassured me about Priscilla. I knew that if I could become clean I would win her in the end. Pouring over His Holy Word I came upon the messages that had been put there, I knew, for me:

“We are troubled on every side yet not distressed. We are perplexed but not in despair.”

“For our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

“While we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens.”

Oh, beautiful and mysterious did the tongue of my Lord sound to me. He spoke to me and I listened. Oh, blessed relief to adore again my Master. Clearly I saw His face now, worn and ravaged and compassionate, and dearly beloved.

The hours of the night sped silently, I did not notice them. The days flowed soundlessly one into the other. I took no account of them. I had no need of food or drink. I fed upon His Word. And as I read, the troubles that had accumulated to weigh me down fell away. The baffling problems presented by the world were solved, instantly, in a flash. Each little hurting thing was put in its proper place.

"The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see . . . how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

"Howbeit we speak wisdom . . . yet not the wisdom of this world. . . . We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery . . . which none of the Princes of this world knew, for had they known it they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."

"But as it is written, eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

"Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise."

All at once I understood and was comforted for the many smarts I had suffered in my village and for the contempt of those great people, the Moones.

For many days I remained in this state of divine meditation and prayer, and God showed me that I had been a brute to Priscilla, and suspicious and unreasonable and nagging, and suddenly one night, thinking calmly of Crab Willing, that Prince of the world, who was a fool and would soon be brought down, it came to me that the way out of all our troubles was for me quite simply to tell Priscilla everything. Her face appeared before my eyes as I knelt.

I saw her as if for the first time in months. Truth was stamped on her face, and a voice said to me, "Confess to her. You longed to confess. Then confess to her, for it is she whom you have wronged. Tell her everything. Open all your heart to her."

I jumped up from my knees blinded by the wonder of this discovery that was the solution of all my problems, and ran across to her room.

"Priscilla," I called, "Priscilla, open the door."

I had no idea what time it was. It did not occur to me that she was already in bed and asleep. I had to call several times and knock loudly. At last she opened.

"What is it, Simon? Are you ill?" She stood there in her nightgown, a wrap round her shoulders.

"No, I have something to say to you, Priscilla, something important."

The room was flooded with moonlight. The curtains were drawn back from the wide window. The moonlight flowed over her tumbled bed, her long, white figure.

"Let me come in," I whispered excitedly. "Let me come in." I was shaking now. She put her arm round my shoulders.

"My poor Simon," she said, and led me to her bed and wrapped me in her quilt and sat down beside me on the edge of the bed, holding my hand and saying as she touched my cheeks, "You are ill, Simon, let me put you back to bed. You have fever. Your hands are cold, but your face is hot."

"No, Priscilla, not ill. Listen. I must tell you. It has just come to me that I must confess everything to you. I have been so unhappy, Priscilla, for so long, and now suddenly I am happy again and can tell you everything. I have had the most dreadful thoughts about you. I thought you were untrue to me. I have been jealous, jealous of Crab. I suspected, I actually suspected him of being in love with you, of making love to you. Ever since he first came home on leave I have been jealous. That is why

I tormented you, why I was so cruel. I was frightened. I imagined that you were slipping away from me. I was so jealous that at times I hated you too, Priscilla. Forgive me, oh, forgive me. I have been mad, Priscilla, mad with pain for months and months. You do not know. You cannot understand what I have suffered. You are only less important to me than God, Priscilla. Were you to fail me I would die. The other night as I was passing your door I heard Puss talking to you. I listened a moment. I heard her say something, not much, something about Crab, but I know now that this was just her evil mind working and that she was wrong. I know that you cannot be untrue, Priscilla. I believe in you as I believe in God. It is the same thing. I know that it is impossible you should betray me. I wanted to confess to you, to apologise to you, to ask your forgiveness."

She listened in silence.

"Simon, poor Simon," she said then, very tenderly, and put her arm round my shoulders.

She was so close to me that I felt her warm breath mingle with mine. The perfume of her body rose round me in a kind of heady vapour. I seemed to be sinking through soft space. Wildly sweet was the intoxication of her. Suddenly I began to whisper things I had never dreamed of saying.

"Let us go back, Priscilla, to the beginning of our life together," I whispered. "Let us begin again. I have been wrong, wrong about everything. It is not good for us to live apart. I will do what you long ago suggested. Only let me be near you again. Let me rest. Let me rest." I sank against her deep breast. I closed my eyes. I seemed to go down, down, it was like drowning in infinite beatitude.

Suddenly she stiffened, made a strong, swift movement, flung me off, was on her feet.

"No, Simon, not that," she cried in a hoarse, suppressed voice.

I clutched and clung to her hands, I felt her trembling.

"Yes, Priscilla, yes. I was wrong. Take me back now. Let us be lovers again, you and I."

"I can't, Simon."

"Why? Why?"

"It's impossible."

"What do you mean? Do you mean——?"

"No, no," she cried, twisting her hands.

We faced each other. Her face gleamed white in the moonlight. I dragged her to the window and taking her face in my hands held it close to my own, turning her head back and looking down into her features.

"What is the meaning of this repulsion?" I hissed at her. "Are you hiding something from me?"

She looked me straight in the eyes.

"Nothing, Simon," she said.

"You swear before God?"

"I swear before God." Her eyes did not waver, though I prayed God in one great, desperate gulp to strike her dead if she were not speaking the truth, and waited. But no change came over her. So I let her go then and turned away from her and leaned on the window sill.

The still garden lay deep entranced in a silver dream. Not a tree, not a leaf moved. The dark masses of beech and oak were of a substance soft and velvety black; a magical gossamer veil of dew, faintly luminous, was drawn over the lawn. Beyond the lily pond that gleamed I saw a white mist floating up from the meadows. An owl called from the wood, and there came to my ears a music of water burbling somewhere near by. How sad a thing beauty is. What a teasing and mean consolation to the ravaged human heart is the loveliness of nature. I thought as I looked out, that if I lost Priscilla this deep mysterious England of mine might become a stricken desert for all the good it could do me.

"It is impossible, Simon," I heard her saying, "You would never be happy that way. You would come to loathe me. We must go on as we are."

I knew what she said was true, but how did she know just what to say? What devilish cunning made her cover herself up with the one excuse that would successfully hide her secret? The words she spoke went straight to the mark, like swift arrows, because to me they were true, but to her they were a farce, a comedy of little masked lies, trotted out to hide her guilt.

I knew that it would be as she predicted. I knew that if I should ever become her lover again I would be damned. She had saved me. She was so strong, so much stronger than I. For the hundredth time she had dominated me, this time I believed for my good. My excitement was all gone. Suddenly I felt terribly tired.

"It will be all right, Simon. Don't be afraid, dear Simon," she said.

I thought, "If I throw myself down out of this window all the weariness will all be over and done with."

"Come back to bed, Simon, let me take you back to bed now. To-morrow we can talk again if you want to, and I will try to be different, I will try to make you happy, Simon, dear."

I must have been weeping. My face was wet. She dried my tears, murmuring, "Simon, poor Simon."

"You know that I love you, Priscilla."

"Yes, dear."

"You do believe it, in spite of everything?"

"Yes, dear."

"But you don't know how much, Priscilla."

"No, perhaps not."

"And I can never tell you, I can never explain."

"Never mind that, Simon. How cold you are."

"If only you could understand."

"I think I do."

"And forgive me, Priscilla!"

"For what, Simon?"

"For being what I am." And again she said, "I do, I do. There is nothing to forgive," and then, "I am so fond of you, Simon."

That is what she said.

And her voice was more kind than it had ever been before, deep and kind and true, like a bell tolling out softly in the still night, under the stars. We stood side by side at the open window, looking out and up. We were very small, she and I. The moon floated high. The world was asleep. A million stars looked down. Two infinitely small creatures in the vast lonely night, companions we were then, friends who loved each other, so it seemed to me. "Perhaps," I thought, "we have found the way at last."

Again an owl hooted in the hollow distance.

"Promise me you will never leave me, Priscilla," I said, scarce knowing why.

A moment she hesitated, then she said it.

"I will never leave you, Simon."

Her voice was grave.

I left her there, standing in the silver light that flowed over her white figure and lay in a pool on the floor at her feet. She looked like an angel come in at the window and standing with folded wings.

The whole thing was a lie, not only Priscilla's speech, but my communion with God. All that ecstasy was nothing but a delirium, a kind of super-intoxication induced by starvation. Just as formerly I had imagined myself commanded by God to be harsh with her, so on this occasion I had invoked His forgiveness and fancied that He guaranteed her innocence. And it was just at this time that she had begun deliberately to deceive me. She was meeting Crab every day. His kisses were on her face that night when I went to her room.

What, then, is this communion with God, the Omniscient, if one can be so deluded by it. What is prayer, anyway? Is it really a projection of one's mind into the presence of the Divine Being, or is it merely the swelling of oneself like a balloon to an unnatural size? Does one talk with God, or does one merely suggest to oneself by reiterated phrases the thoughts that one wants to believe?

The answer is of the utmost importance. It will have for me a terrible significance. Suppose it were true that I was talking on my knees to that pigmy myself, that there was no one listening, no one answering? I see myself bowed, holding out my supplicating hands to—nothing, to myself. I hear my voice insisting endlessly, endlessly entreating, endlessly repeating. My words do not travel out into the infinite. They do not mount up to Heaven. They get no further than the confines of my room. They beat feebly like little pattering hands on the walls. They fall back. They swirl round me. They form an electric haze round me. The small space that encloses me is filled with them, with an interminable increasing murmur, mingled with echoing cries, calls of distress, tears. All this creates a psychic medium in which my mind swims, superlatively excited. That's all there is to it. Oh poor deluded fool! Oh pitiable and ludicrous vision! You were cheated! Simon cheated! Signals of distress sent out into the night from lost and foundering souls, these are prayers, but no one picks them up, do you hear? There is no great wireless operator sitting in the Heavens, no receiving station, nothing.

We are all adrift. We can only signal to each other then. The course we steer by is laid down by man. There are only men to help us, men who are fighting to keep afloat themselves; bandy-legged egotists, straddling life uncertainly, peering blindly ahead through the dark, seeing only a little way, lost like me, lost, I tell you, in the immense dark confusion, doomed like me, to die.

What good is man to me? Can the blind lead the blind? What man is there alive or dead that can tell me what I want to know; where I came from, where I am going, what there is beyond, what it is all for, what quite simply, it is, this thing we call existence?

There is no answer, say the wise old philosophers wearily, there is only the question. We are put here on this planet, to wonder for a little, then flicked off it like flies off a cake,

into nothingness, where we do not even know that we have wondered.

"That," I cry, "is inconceivable."

Oh, miserable, fidgeting creature that I am, I cannot believe and I cannot disbelieve.

But let me go back to what I was talking about. The voice of God, or what I took to be the voice of God, told me to trust Priscilla at the very moment when she gave herself up to her lover. I saw nothing. I suspected nothing. By some awful, ironical freak of mood, I was reassured at the instant of greatest danger, I had a sense of respite, of unwonted security.

What it amounted to was that I had had enough of suffering. I was exhausted. I was full. I could not contain any more pain. My stuffed heart, like an overloaded stomach, belched out all the poison it contained. This happened inevitably and senselessly, according to some physical law. It had no connection with truth or fact.

And Priscilla in her new happiness achieved a new duplicity. She was calm, she was satisfied, she could afford to be kind. She had what she wanted. She was being fed all unknown to me from a source I ignored. She would come back from meeting her lover drowsy with bliss, her senses ravished, her blood warm, and would smile at me with a lovely light in her eyes that was the lingering afterglow of the light that her love had lighted there. She served up to me his leavings. It was the overflow of her full cup that I tasted.

She had grown beautiful. She walked proudly. She was no longer tired. There was a little smile on her lips. Her chuckle bubbled out constantly. She would roll about on the grass playing with her puppies and call up to my window, "Come out, Simon, come and play," and I would join her, happy because of her happiness.

It was almost like the early days of our marriage. I thought, "She is reconciled, she at last understands."

CHAPTER IX

THE war was over. I scarcely noticed its ending. There was to be a General Election, they said. Lord Willing was to stand as Conservative candidate in our division. A Labour man would oppose him, but Willing was sure to get in. The Moones would have it all their own way.

The Khaki Election. "Hang the Kaiser." "A country fit for heroes to live in." Lloyd George, back from Paris, was already fulminating through the country.

One day Priscilla laughed, holding a letter from Lady Agatha in her hand:

"Mummy's on the other side. She's backing the Labour man."

The farce began. The village and the countryside in a night were plastered with posters. On every blank wall, every stable, public house, shop, on wooden hoardings, rising behind hedges in the fields, on the inside of arched railway bridges, on the gates of big houses, appeared the monstrous blue and white placards. "Willing for Westminster." "Vote for our Hero." "From Battlefield to Parliament." "Willing's your Man." Willing, Willing, his name was everywhere. All along the high road to Exminster it glared at you. In the rain, in the sun, in the snow, there it was in staring letters, high in the air, flung like a ridiculous banner across the country, and accompanied by curses. "Down with the Pacifists." "Where was Powell during the War?" "A vote for Powell is a vote for the enemies of your country. A vote for Willing is a vote for England."

A grotesque and horrible picnic was spread over our quiet countryside. It lasted three weeks. It was like a hideous, glorified beanfeast. The publicans swelled out

their chests. Beer flowed in rivers. In every bar room hoarse and bibulous voices bawled the name of Willing, the Hero. An orgy of mis-statement, of sordid pretensions, of cheap and violent emotions, was let loose. A thousand pamphlets, crammed with fantastic lies and unredeemable promises, were dropped into letter boxes, were shoved under doors, were scattered in the village square, fluttered into mud puddles, got caught in hedges. The Tory motors swarmed. An army of helpers had come down from London. A bodyguard of young bloods followed Crab wherever he went. One caught glimpses of him with Lord Moone, flying through the village in a Rolls Royce fantastically decorated with blue rosettes, a black cat arching its back on the shiny bonnet. Lady Moone multiplied herself. The Mayoress of Exminster became her intimate. Every alderman, publican, draper, butcher and baker became her intimate. Blandly she stepped down into the blousy mob whose existence she had haughtily ignored. Her smile was like the Sun of Heaven. It shone on the just and the unjust, on doctors and solicitors and plodding district nurses, on blacksmiths and farmers and washerwomen and bank clerks. She shook hands with them all. All day long and every day she shook hands with the scum of the earth and hobnobbed with farm hands and flattered cowmen and carters and fondled the puny, unwashed babies of the poor. She, too, had her squad. Lady Sidlington came down, and a number of Crab's smart women friends. They invaded factories and almshouses, schools, hospitals and infirmaries. They went up and down, knocking at cottage doors, and standing in the rain, the mud, the wind, they could talk wheedlingly of Lord Willing, the gallant Tory candidate who had lost a leg in the war.

And no one saw through them. No one resented them. Didn't Lord Moone own half the county and all the town of Exminster? Could one of them remember a time when his name was not mentioned with awe? Hadn't their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers been his tenants?

In our part of the division the people were docile. Even the poorest and most wretched opened their gaping mouths and swallowed the dope that these dashing young people in sable or fur-lined coats served out to them. "My father was a Conservative, and my grandfather was a Conservative, and I reckon I'll live and die a Conservative." So spoke the ash man, the scavenger, the decrepit and broken starveling. My friend Mrs. Penny, the charwoman who went out in daily service and was toiling through her seventieth year on her knees in the noisome wet of other people's floors, was flattered by Lady Moone's visit. "She came right in, sir, did her leddyship, and sat herself down on that chair, all in her lovely clothes. My, how beautiful she did look. I couldn't take my eyes off her. And she told me all about his lordship, what a good son he was, and all that, just as any plain body would do, and I thought of my poor Jimmy, who'd 'ave looked arter me in me old age if 'e'd been spared." Then screwing up her withered old red face, she added viciously, "I'll have nought to do with that there Labour. Traitors they is, that's wot they is, traitors and Socialists."

Priscilla took no part in the campaign, I do not know why, out of consideration for her mother perhaps, or perhaps out of caution. She must have come to an understanding with Crab on the subject. Lady Moone, however, did not seem to be aware of this. She paid us a visit, during which in the middle of an overwhelming display of friendliness she showed her teeth.

"You're not going to help, Priscilla?"

"Oh, yes, as much as I can."

"And what exactly does that mean, my dear child?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"You'll organise your own village, at any rate? The people adore you. They'll do, of course, just what you tell them."

"Oh, they're all right."

"Oh, you think so?" Her ladyship was annoyed.

"How can one possibly tell? How is one to know what goes on in their heads? Nothing, one imagines. All the same, there's more socialism about than you think, and they go to all the meetings and believe everything they're told. Of course the Labour candidate has the misfortune to be a total abstainer, but even then, though the working man does want his beer, and wants it cheap, the fellow, I believe, is eloquent, and has the colliers behind him. They'll go solid for Labour. Crab's agent tells me we won't get a hundred votes out of the five thousand. Moone went over last night. They really were quite unpleasant, asked him the most insulting questions about how much he thought a miner with six children ought to have as a living wage, and did he think he earned the royalties he got from the mines. That sort of thing. They want nationalisation, you know, and say Lloyd George is a hypocrite. Of course one knows they are poor, but they don't have such a bad time, with their football and whippets and so on. Such sick men they seem. It's very odd. Not at all big and strong, hollow chested. I'm told there's a great deal of tuberculosis among them, but that, after all, isn't our fault. They'd catch cold quite as often if they did take Moone's royalties away from him and handed them over to the Government. What do you think, Vicar? Are you with us, or do you agree with Agatha? For your sake, Priscilla, I will not say what I think of this latest fad of Agatha's. Moone is speechless with disgust. He feels, of course, that she has let us down, gone back on her class, you know."

"I don't think Mummy ever had any very strong feeling about class," said Priscilla, flushing.

"Well, well, we won't talk of it, but you, Vicar," and she flashed her eyes at me. "Are you going to vote for my son or are you, too, in sympathy with these odd people?"

She filled me with horror. Her arrogance, her cruelty, her stiff smooth elegant figure, her heartless high-nosed

face with its flashing eyes and teeth, her long neatly-shod arched foot that tapped impatiently, her suave biting enunciation, everything about her enraged me. I detested politics. I loathed the lies that made up the stuff of it. I had not intended to vote at all, but suddenly in her overwhelming and crushing presence I remembered the miners of those bleak villages across the hills, going wearily home in the evening, with blackened faces, huge limp clumsy hands dangling listlessly, shoulders sagging, and I realised that I was a comrade of all those who protested against what she represented.

"I shall vote for Mr. Powell," I said coldly.

"Ah, I see." She lifted her eyebrows. Her lips curled. "You are consistent." She enunciated with cutting precision.

Priscilla flushed crimson. "I would vote for Crab, of course, if I had a vote," she announced, "but I understand perfectly how Simon feels." Her face was stubborn.

It is very curious to me now to think of how she stood up for me then. I do not understand. Crab was her lover. Lady Moone represented her son. What made Priscilla range herself beside me and stand up to the woman? I suppose she knew that Crab wouldn't mind. How well they must have understood each other, those two, even then!

Lady Agatha brought her Labour man to see us soon after this. She reminded me when she trailed in, of some weary and dusty pilgrim leading a bear on a string. The man was huge, thickset, uncouth. He was a collier. He talked with a very broad accent, but as he talked one realised that he was nothing more than a violent and ignorant child. There was something very winning and something rather frightening about him. His eyes were of a forget-me-not blue. They were like little innocent flowers in his big low-browed heavy-jawed face. His immense hands were clumsy. One felt that they might be gentle, and that they might brutally knock one down. With

Priscilla he was at first shy, awkwardly, pathetically attentive and self-conscious, and when he spoke of his youth in the one-roomed cottage where his little sick sister had to be moved out of the single bed to make room for his father who had been injured down the mine, where his mother had taught him the Scriptures over her wash-tub, he was falteringly eloquent, but when he began to speak of his politics, he suddenly lashed himself into a fury and began to bellow like a bull.

A strange couple they made, Lady Agatha Brampton and Alf Powell the collier. One saw perfectly how it worked. She had been taken by his roughness, his poverty, his simplicity, his violent and boiling idealism, and by his righteous principles. He was a megaphone that shouted abroad from public platforms the simple truths that she cherished in her heart. He stood for the poor, the needy, the unfortunate. He was the champion of the under dog, and he called upon God to right the wrongs of the people. Priscilla and I went to the meeting he held in our village school. Lady Agatha sat on the platform, her long head trembling on its sensitive throat, her hands nervously clutching a wad of paper. She was billed to speak. The schoolmaster was in the chair. He spoke of Karl Marx and the theory of Socialism and completely bewildered the farm lads who crowded the wooden benches. Then Powell rose to his feet under the flaming oil lamp and lashed them all to a fury, pounding on the desk with his huge fist and calling on the name of God in every other sentence. Twenty times, Priscilla said, in thirty minutes, she counted. One could make little sense of what he said, his sincerity was not convincing, but his emphasis left nothing to be desired and the emotion he aroused was almost unpleasant. One felt it pulsating in the hot crowded little room where the iron stove blazed red and a hundred sweating bodies steamed. Women blew their noses. Someone shouted "Amen." Voices were lifted then.

"That's it. It's the truth he's speaking." He ended his address with the words, "On Thursday, when you go to the Poll, remember what God would do, He would come down and vote for Labour." Wrapt, serious, intensely attentive faces greeted this statement. He strode out amid thundering applause. Then Lady Agatha rose to speak. Gaunt, tired, immensely tall; like a feeble and frightened scarecrow she stood there. The papers rattled in her hand. The tip of the feathers in her ungainly hat quivered visibly under the lamp. She smiled hesitatingly her heavenly smile; almost idiotic it was in its beautiful simplicity.

"Friends," she said, "I am here not as a politician but as a follower of Christ." A hush fell on the little room, on the bulky forms, on the heavy brutish faces. She spoke no word of politics. Indeed, I believe she knew nothing about politics. Oh, divine unsophisticated Agatha Brampton! She told them that she loved them, that she wanted them to be happy, and that to be happy they must cease their evil-doing, do away with drink and public houses and gambling. She said that they must be law-abiding and reverent and choose good and righteous men to govern them. She said that they must remember the men who had died for them at the War, men who had died for their country and that they must live worthy of those men who had given their lives. And she told them that she knew they would, that she believed in them. "It is because I trust you and believe in you that I am here," she said, "and because I am ashamed of the injustices in our land, and finally, because I believe in the equality of all men before God," and then, inconsequently, without transition, and, indeed, it seemed as an afterthought, she ended lamely, "So I hope that you will all vote for the Labour Candidate."

She made a great impression. Priscilla drove her to the next village. She was speaking six times that evening, she murmured, as she floated vaguely through the crowded

doorway and out into the dark where the rain was coming down. "Good-night, me Lady. Good-night. Good-night. God bless you." Rough subdued voices followed her. Something there was in her gentleness that won them, but very pathetic and lonely she seemed to me that night. I thought of her floundering from village to village in the dark, an uncouth hand holding a lantern to guide her, rough and sordid men crowding round her, their breath strong with liquor, and giggling blousy women, momentarily silenced and respectful, but laughing at her, no doubt, when her back was turned. So isolated, so out of place, so unaware, she seemed to me. A blind and fumbling enthusiast, hoping incorrigibly, believing incomprehensibly in mankind, stumbling along in a sordid world, peering at it with weak near-sighted eyes, and seeing it as beautiful, thinking no evil of any man.

Priscilla had tucked sandwiches into her mother's mackintosh pocket. "Promise me you'll eat them," she said, and when she came back that night she stood silently by the fire, then said, "Poor angel, her feet were sopping," and I saw her eyes fill with tears.

How could she? How could she? She knew perfectly well she was going to break her mother's heart.

Crab was, of course, elected, but not by the overwhelming majority that had been expected.

Lord Moone was reported to have said that his cousin, Lady Agatha, ought to be locked up. She had done any amount of harm in the division, it appeared.

CHAPTER X

How many times had they met in the garden at night before I found them there? Only a few times, Priscilla said, when I cross-questioned her afterwards, but I know she lied. She admitted in the end that she had lied to me about so much, why not about that? "So as not to hurt me," she said. God forgive her, as if my imaginings were not more unbearable than anything she could tell me. What I wanted was facts, every fact, every detail that I could wring out of her.

She didn't give me many. There are thousands she held back. Everything that is important. She only threw me a sop when she had to, when she was frightened. "He had a flat in London," she admitted. I could fasten my teeth into that, chew it, suck the bitter nauseating juice out of it.

I remembered then that she had been constantly going to town that spring of nineteen nineteen. She must have gone to his flat in the afternoons, like a woman of the streets, slipping into the door from the street, Jermyn Street, going up in the lift. The lift man must have known what she came for. Sometimes she stayed two or three days, with Lady Sidlington or Puss Featherstone she said. Puss had a flat, too. They all had flats. Priscilla may have had one of her own. How can I tell? And what is there to prove that they didn't go away together, she and Crab? It would have been easy to take the train from town to Brighton, or some place on the Thames where disreputable people go for week-ends, or even to Paris. I would never know. I was far away, safely buried in my hole in the country. Once she stayed away a week. She had been very gay, she said. They

had gone to a lot of plays, had danced, dined out. Peggy had given a party. Chaliapin had sung. She had had a very good time. Under my questioning she accounted for each moment of it. On Monday afternoon she had played bridge at the Stuarts; on Tuesday morning she had slept late and gone to the hair-dresser. She always had her alibis ready.

In March she went to Aintree. The Sidlingtons had a party for the Grand National. Who was there? Oh, a lot of amusing people. The Grosvenors, Elliots, Crab Willing. He had a horse running, she added casually.

Ha! The signal of alarm! My nerves leapt to the summons, set up their tingling and jangling in my head, twisting my stomach. The old sickness, the old clammy wet of my hands.

"So Crab was there?"

"Yes, his horse came in second."

"How was he?"

"He seemed quite fit."

"We haven't seen him for a long time."

"No."

"He never comes here any more."

"No."

"He's busy, I suppose?"

"Yes, in the House."

"Of course, his Parliamentary duties. Still, he must come down sometimes to Jericho Sands."

"Oh, yes."

"But he never comes to see us."

"I asked him to. He said he would, that is he said he would try to get over some day."

"I suppose you see him in London?"

"Sometimes. He's about, you know."

"About?"

"At dinners and things. One runs into him."

Why didn't I stop her? I tried to, and so, alas, did my mother. "Not going to town again, Priscilla?" she would

wail, when Priscilla appeared at breakfast dressed for town.

"Yes."

"But who will take your Girl Guides this afternoon?"

"Oh, I forgot," helping herself to eggs and bacon.

"You're always forgetting things these days, my dear."

"Am I?"

"Yes, my child, you are, and there's Barstow. He wants you to decide about the repairs for the cottages on the lower farm. He's got the estimates ready. He's coming this morning."

"They can wait till to-morrow. I'll be back by the late train." She gulped down her coffee.

"Good-bye, Simon."

"I wish you wouldn't go, dear."

"But, Simon—I told you."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I told you about lunching with Milly and Bob."

"I'd forgotten. In any case, I wish you wouldn't."

"But why, Simon? Mary Sands can take the Girl Guides. I'll stop on my way to the station. I shall just have time."

She was impatient to be off. She stood there, stamping as it were with impatience, her head alert, her eyes on the clock. Suddenly she embraced me. There was the sound of wheels outside.

"There's Simpkins to fetch me," she breathed excitedly. "Good-bye, darling. I'm so sorry." She kissed the top of my head and was gone. My mother and I were left staring at each other.

What was one to do? Has any man ever known how to keep a woman from doing a thing she has determined to do without getting himself detested?

I was so afraid of Priscilla, so very afraid of her hating me. There was something ruthless about her during this time, something harsh and inevitable. She was like a

steam roller, or a ship under full sail. She bore on regardless. She was concentrated, stubborn, relentless. Nothing could have stopped her. Anything that got in her way would have been crushed. Her appearance had changed. She seemed to care much more about her clothes and to have acquired a very vulgar taste in them. She wore tight skirts that showed her legs and stiff little hats that hid her face. One saw too little of her face and far too much of her long lithe body. One saw nothing under the brim of her hat but the tip of her nose and her red lips that she coloured now with carmine. There were days when I found her hideous and at the same time strangely disturbing. There were moments when I did not recognise her, when I caught my breath as it were in the presence of an alluring and seductive stranger. "Wash that stuff off your lips, Priscilla," I would command nervously, "and take off that ugly hat." "But it's a very smart hat, Simon." "I don't care about that. I dislike it intensely." She would lift it from her head then calmly and laugh and shake her short wavy hair. She wore it parted on the side like a boy. How prettily it grew round her face. Little tendrils curled round her forehead and ears, childishly, soft child's hair, very fair and thick.

"There, is that better?" She would wipe the red from her lips and suddenly appear beautiful again to me and charming, standing there with her gallant boyish air, her candid eyes smiling at me under her level honest brow. And I would say to myself, "No, you are wrong, she cannot be untrue." Her face a hundred times brought me back to my belief in her.

But in the long quiet evenings her eyelids would grow heavy, her long limbs relax. She would lounge silently in her chair by the fire, doing nothing, scarcely seeming to breathe, so still she was, and I would think that she was asleep, but looking round would find her eyes shining under their heavy lids. White heavy lids over shining

eyes, they haunted me. The dreams that I surprised in them seemed to float from her brain into mine. An awful sympathy established itself between us. An exquisite and dreadful sensation of vicarious pleasure would palpitate in my heart. It was like listening to a voice singing in her breast. The echo of a strange and fateful poetry resounded there in the stillness, and I, caught by the impalpable magic, would thrill miserably, my wracked nerves atune in spite of me. I was like a man drunk for a moment with another's intoxication. It was as if I were become double. With one part of me I entered into her and drank deep of the springs of her emotions, with the other I suffered the pangs of a man dying of thirst in the sight of water.

A more exquisite mental agony than this understanding of her love for another man I cannot imagine.

I began to spy upon her. If I could surprise the secrets in her eyes I could find out other things. I followed her about. If she went down to the village, I, too, would take the road to the village five minutes later. More than once I saw her posting a letter in the letter-box outside the Post Office. If she went into the garden I went into the garden. If she sat in the library I sat there with her. I thought, "By keeping her constantly in sight I will learn something, something that I must know. If I stick close to her I shall be able to read her thoughts."

But I did not succeed in this. My unwelcome presence warned her. I got on her nerves. She closed her mind to me and was constantly on her guard.

And at night she escaped me. In her room at night she was out of my reach. Often I went to her door, heard her moving about, humming a little tune, heard her drop her slippers on the floor, get into bed, sigh contentedly. Sometimes I would go and stand under her window in the dark. What was she thinking of, up there in her mysterious room? Was she asleep or awake? Did she dream?

I could not sleep. As the summer deepened I suffered

more and more from insomnia. I took to prowling about the house. I could not stay in my room. I was too tired to pray, and Priscilla was too near. Sometimes on moonlight nights I went over to the church. There I obtained some relief. Kneeling in one of the empty pews, my unhappiness would be eased. All round me were the empty benches. Through the tall narrow windows filtered the light of the moon or the dim half-light of the stars. The altar loomed obscurely in the shadow. The tablets of the dead were there on invisible walls and the still tombs of my ancestors.

There was a benediction in those consecrated stones. The spirit of God reigned there, formal, distant, infinite, Jehovah the Great God, eternal, impenetrable, grand. I sank down at his feet. I felt myself no more important than an insect, fluttering wearily in the immense gloom of an incomprehensible universe.

I gave up trying to understand. I no longer sought an answer to the weary lament of my spirit. The Church rebuked me. It showed me that my past conduct had been folly and impertinence. Who was I to presume upon my personal relation with the Almighty? I was an obscure fragment in the great edifice of the Church of God. To keep its divine laws and expound faithfully its doctrine, this was all that it required of me. I had been a frantic and futile egotist in Christ.

And in regard to Priscilla I knew that I was to blame. I was to blame for everything that she was not. It was impossible for her to love Christ when I, a Christian, was so unlovely. I decided wearily to go away. I saw that our life at Creech had become impossible. I would give up the living and ask to be sent to some mission in a distant country. There, in new and strange surroundings we would begin again. A life of hardship might save us. I had thought of this often before, but had put off the decision for various reasons, one of them being that I had not wanted to leave Creech while I was so detested there.

It would have seemed like running away. My mother, too, had been an excuse for staying. Now I saw that I should never have come home to be pampered and stuffed and distracted by a life of ease. I was too weak to stand it.

One warm night in July I was meditating on these things in the still church when something, some premonition of danger, or some small distant sound registered unconsciously by my ear, drew me to my feet and to the door of the church that I had left a little ajar. I remember the old town clock in the village struck twelve as I stood there transfixed by the sight of Priscilla crossing the lawn from the house in the moonlight. She had a hooded cloak round her shoulders. Her head was bare. She passed swiftly, like a ghost, across the grass, and disappeared down the walk that led to the rose garden. A moment later I was after her, keeping to the shadows of the shrubbery, but when I reached the rose garden and paused to peer out from behind a tree at the open space where the roses clustered, colourless in the moonlight but heavily fragrant, there was no one to be seen. She had vanished. I dared not cross the open space. I skirted the garden, keeping behind the bushes, sometimes crawling on all fours, until I came opposite the summerhouse that stood like an island in a sea of flowers. I heard the sound of voices coming from it. Carefully I crept up from behind until I was close to the frail wooden partition, there I crouched down and listened.

“ Kiss me again,” said a voice, Priscilla’s voice.

The still night heaved at the sound of it. A ripple of silent laughter scurried over the roses like a wind. The tall trees at the far side of the garden swayed forward in a mass, immense trees, velvet black as they had been that other night, bending now like wheat. So it seemed to me.

“ How many times have I kissed you ? ” The man’s voice now, deep, deep it was, and deeply disturbed. There

sounded a sob in it and a strong pulling cadence, heavy and overpowering like a wave that engulfs.

"A thousand times but not enough," she said, and gave a little swooning moan.

He was silent. He was kissing her. "I have only begun," he said then, and she moaned again—and again he was kissing her.

"Your mouth. Your mouth," he muttered. "Mine. Mine."

Shuddering violently I sank to the ground. The scent of the roses washed over me—a delirium of perfume. Through it as if I were submerged under water I heard sounds now, small, and muffled. Whispers, scarce that, whispers suffocated quickly in soft impacts, sighs extinguished, sucking noises, purring sounds—then silence again—a silence as hideous as a yell.

"What a lovely night," she breathed at last on a sigh of ecstatic exhaustion.

"Yes, all the stars are shining for you, my sweet, and the moon dips low—the cold little silly moon. You are driving it away."

"I wonder are there people up there, do you think, lovers like ourselves?"

"None like us."

"I hope there are. I like to think that all the world and every lovely star is full of people, like you and me."

"Do you, lady mine? Then it is so, and if it isn't it shall be. Everything shall be just as you wish on Mars and Venus and on the earth, so help me God."

"Darling," she murmured. I could not move. I was fascinated by her voice, a voice that I had never heard. Oh, the terrible and sweet music that their voices made out there in the warm perfumed night. I listened spell-bound.

"Lovely little lady, oh, lovely, lovely lady of my heart. Turn your head. There. Now I can see your funny nose. Such an absurd nose you have, child. It's to

make me laugh. God made it like that to make me laugh, because your eyes were too wonderful, He said, and might drive me to madness or make me awfully sad, you know, as dreams do that are too beautiful. There are dreams in your eyes, Priscilla, deep, deep dreams and little kisses in the corners of your mouth, but I won't steal them away now, because I must talk to you seriously to-night."

"Yes," she breathed. "Talk to me. Talk to me so that when I am alone I can remember and repeat to myself the things that you have said. Always I remember every single word and all the sounds in your voice. It goes on. I hear it all day. Sometimes in the garden, I stop and listen and hear you say, 'Priscilla, child, look at me, say you love me,' and you are not there at all. So funny, isn't it? But I say it all the same, to the trees or the dandelions or the fat ducks in the pond. 'I love you, Crab,' I say aloud all alone. 'I love you for ever.'"

"Swear that you will?"

"I swear."

"Till death!"

"Till death."

"And never be sorry?"

"Never."

"And never look back?"

"Never."

"And always be mine?"

"Always."

"I worship you," he said. "May God strike me dead to-night if I ever let anyone hurt a hair of your head."

"No one can hurt me now," she murmured. "No one. How could they? I live in you. No one could hurt me now but you yourself, and were you to hurt me to death, I would love you still. I want you to know that. I want you to know that for me, this is the end. Were I to die to-night it would be enough. I ask no more than this."

"Ah—You wonderful thing—Heart of mine—Sweet, sweet brave heart."

Her answer was a murmur only, I could not catch the words, if words there were. For some moments their voices were sounds—mediums of love that had no employ for words. “My love,” she called him, and again and again, “my dear,” with little sounds and silences in between, and he repeated over and over such words as “my darling,” “my little heart,” “my precious thing,” then I heard him say :

“Now, Priscilla, listen.”

“Yes, Crab.”

“You must come to me soon, altogether. This cannot go on. You are mine, and you must come away with me.”

But she broke in, “I cannot leave Simon,” she said.

“You must, Priscilla, for you are mine. Are you mine?”

“Yes.”

“You know that you belong to me?”

“Yes.”

“Then what more is there to say?”

“I can’t leave him, Crab.”

“He’ll divorce you, and as soon as the divorce is through we’ll be married.”

“It’s not that.”

“I must have you, my darling, all for my own. It is intolerable your living like this in another man’s house, as another man’s wife. Yes, yes, I know, but all the same, you must be mine before the world. I must have the right to look after you. I alone. By God, Priscilla, when I think. You don’t mean to say you want to go on like this?”

“No.”

“Well, then?”

“I promised I wouldn’t leave him.”

“You don’t love me, then, not really, not trustingly. You don’t dare take it on—the long serious business of being together always as man and wife.”

“I do, I do!”

"Well, prove it. Come away with me. Come! What's a promise to another where you and I are concerned?"

"I can't, Crab."

"God, how obstinate you are. Don't you see that if we go on meeting like this someone is sure to find out?"

"I can't help it. I can't leave Simon."

"Because you promised?"

"Because I promised, and because—I can't."

"I believe you are fond of him."

"Of course."

"Damned blighter, sanctimonious worm, snivelling humbug!"

"Don't, Crab!"

"Well, I can't stand it. He torments the life out of you. He's a cad and a coward."

"No, no, he's good."

"Hang it all, Priscilla, I don't understand you. If you love me as you say you do then you can't care for that saintly prig. He's got a face like a decayed monk."

"Crab!" Her voice was a sudden cry of pain.

"Well, I apologise," he grumbled, and they were silent.

"You won't do it then?" he asked in a dull tone after a long interval.

"No, I won't leave Simon."

"Then I'm off."

"Crab!"

"Sorry, but I can't stick it, my dear."

"Crab!" she cried softly.

"Good-night," he replied.

"Don't go like that, Crab. Don't leave me like that."

Suddenly I came to my senses and knew that if they came out they would find me there. As I crept away I heard her imploring him. "Kiss me, Crab. Take me in your arms. I can't—I can't—Oh, I would if I could." He must have done as she bid him. They did not hear me go.

CHAPTER XI

I DO not remember clearly what happened after this. The rest of that night is vague and confused as nightmares are. I must have fled from the house. I remember the white road in the moonlight, and a man running down it. I remember Doone Bridge and the deathly stillness that reigned when the moon had set, the stars paled and a grey shroud was pulled over the body of the earth. It was as if the world had died between the end of the night and the beginning of day. Dawn found me in Mordiford woods on my face on the ground. There began a noisy twittering of birds and scampering of little things. I started back. Near the gates of Creech, I met a man in a cart. The early sun was shining in my eyes. He stared at me as if I had been a ghost. It must have been six o'clock when I burst into Priscilla's room. She was so sound asleep that she did not stir. I took hold of her roughly, pulling back the bedclothes, uncovering her breast.

"Wake up," I shouted, "Wake up."

"What is it Simon? What is the matter?"

She sat up rubbing her eyes like a child. Her nightgown had slipped off her shoulder.

"Cover your breast," I screamed. "Get out of bed and put on some clothes. I can't talk to you like that."

"What time is it?" she asked stupidly, and then—"What on earth is the matter, Simon? You are covered with twigs and things. Where have you been?"

"I've been in Mordiford woods."

"So early?"

"No, so late."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've not been to bed."

" You've been up all night ? "

" Yes."

" In the woods all night ? "

" No. Get up, I tell you. Go and put on some clothes. Do as I say." She fumbled for her slippers, pulled a dressing gown round her, stood, bewildered.

" But Simon, what is it ? "

" Will you obey me or will you not ? Go and get on your clothes."

She went then into her dressing room. I heard her splashing about. I waited. I felt terribly cold. When she came back she was dressed in some cotton frock, blue it was I remember, for it made her eyes blue. And she came forward with an awful lying tenderness on her face.

" Simon dear."

" Adulteress," I hissed. It was like spitting on her. Yes, that was what I did, I spat in her face, not literally.

She stiffened with a terrible ungainly jerk, flung up her head and stood still looking me straight in the eyes.

" How long have you been Crab Willing's mistress ? "

She seemed not to hear. She didn't answer. She continued to stare at me.

" How long have you been a harlot, Priscilla ? Answer me."

" I—I don't know what you mean," she said at last.

" You lie, but it is useless to lie. I was in the garden last night behind the summer house. I heard you."

" You heard ? "

" Yes, I heard. I was there close to you, as close as I am now. I heard every word that you said."

" You heard ? " she breathed again, " but how ? But where ? "

She did not seem to understand.

" I saw you go out, I followed you, I listened."

" You did that, Simon ? " she asked.

" Yes, I did. I am a cad, Priscilla, a snivelling humbug, wasn't that what he said ? "

She looked at me wildly then. "Oh, Simon, how could you?" She gasped.

But I was not going to be diverted from my purpose by any sense of her horror of my spying on her or any side-issue of that sort.

"How long have you belonged to that man?"

She looked at me a moment, then said—"Always, Simon."

Her reply enraged me. "Answer me in plain English, Priscilla, no poetry if you please. When did you fall in love with him?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"You don't know how long you've been deceiving me, how long you've been an adulteress?"

"I'm not an adulteress."

"What's that—you deny? You'll deny next that we are married."

"But I don't think we are, Simon."

I groaned aloud. Her calm was terrible. She was passive as a stone and as heavy. Incredible as it was, I saw that she had no sense of having sinned. Accusing her was like beating with one's hands against a rock. I was making no mark on her surface. I was only bruising myself.

I fell back from her, actually that is, several steps, dropped into a chair and covered my face with my hands to shut out the sight of her sullen obstinate face. I would have to attack her in a different way. I would have to be cunning and patient, I must get it all out of her bit by bit, with little leading questions, then surprise her suddenly into an admission of her shame.

If I forced her to relate to me all the facts of the case and every mean and miserable thing that she had done, the cumulative effect on her of her own shameful tale would at last overwhelm her. Not what I said, but what I would force her to say herself would break her down.

"How long have you been meeting Crab Willing without my knowledge, Priscilla?"

' For some time.'

' You have met him often ? '

" Yes."

" In London ? "

" Yes."

" Each time that you went to town ? "

" Yes."

" You went in order to meet him ? "

" Yes."

" How did you arrange ? "

" I wrote. He met me."

" Where ? "

" Wherever I said."

" You wrote constantly then ? "

" Yes."

" How did you post the letters ? "

" Sometimes I took them to Exminster."

" And he, did he write to you here ? "

" No."

" Why not ? "

" I told him not to."

" Why ? "

" I was afraid Bunny would see the letters."

" Ah, so you were afraid."

" Yes."

" Afraid that I would find out ? "

" Yes."

" You told me that you stayed with Puss Featherstone and Lady Sidlington in London. Was that true ? "

" Yes."

" You never stayed anywhere else ? "

" No."

" Did he come to see you there, in Lady Sidlington's house ? "

" He was often there."

" Where else did you meet ? "

" We often lunched and dined."

"Is that all?"

"I don't understand you."

"I think you do, Priscilla."

"Is this necessary, Simon?"

"It is. After lunch did he leave you?"

"Sometimes."

"And at other times?"

"Simon, don't, don't make me." She had gone very white.

"Where did you go together, Priscilla? Answer me."

"He had a flat," she muttered.

"Ah." I waited a moment. A monstrous silence hung over us, taut like a balloon, crammed with her unspeakable admission. I thought for an instant that it would burst, that she would break it with a hysterical cry and pour out all its noisome contents into the room, but she only shot at me one dreadful look, then stared at the floor and became more still and expressionless than before.

I began again.

"Puss Featherstone knew then?"

"Yes."

"And Lady Sidlington?"

"I suppose so."

"'I suppose so'—don't you know that she knew?"

"No."

"But she saw you and Crab together?"

"Yes."

"In fact she brought you together constantly."

"Yes."

"Made everything easy and pleasant? Put her house at your disposal?"

No answer.

"And yet you mean to say you didn't talk to her?"

"No, not about Crab."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It doesn't matter." She made a weary gesture.

"It does matter. Everything matters. It matters

enormously that you should tell me the truth. What did Lady Sidlington think? That's what I want to know."

"She took it for granted."

"And asked no questions?"

"No."

"Your affair with Crab was an accepted thing then?"

"I suppose so."

"And all the other people you went about with? Did they know? Did they too take it for granted?"

"I don't know."

"Think a moment. You have admitted that you and Crab were constantly together. Didn't his friends notice anything peculiar in your relationship?"

"They knew he liked me."

"And that you had a husband somewhere, safely out of the way?"

"I suppose so."

"So they must have drawn their conclusions?"

"Perhaps."

"In other words you were known in London to be Lord Willing's mistress."

"No."

"What do you mean by no?"

"They wouldn't think of it that way."

"Indeed?"

"I mean they wouldn't bother."

I shifted my ground.

"How many times have you met here in the garden at night?"

"Not many."

"How many?"

"Only a few times."

"A dozen times?"

"No, two or three times."

"Where did he meet you down here?"

"Nowhere much."

"Tell me the truth. Where did you meet?"

"Once in Mordiford woods."

"And?"

"And once in Exminster."

"You went to Exminster to meet him?"

"Yes."

"How did you go?"

"Motored."

"Where did you meet in Exminster?"

"At the Warburton Arms; we had tea."

"In the coffee-room?"

"No, in a private sitting-room."

"Upstairs?"

"Yes."

"How long did you stay?"

"An hour."

"Is that the only time you went there?"

"Yes."

"You met nowhere else?"

"No."

"You had no confidant here who helped you, made it possible for you to meet?"

"No."

"You never met at Tweedle's cottage?"

"No, that is, only once, by accident."

"I don't believe you." She shifted her hands and dropped them again to her sides.

"There is no sense in what you say, Priscilla. Why didn't you meet down here more often, if you met constantly in London?"

"It didn't seem fair."

"What?" I yelled.

"It didn't seem fair to you." She made this astounding statement looking me straight in the eyes.

"I don't understand you, Priscilla."

She hesitated then and seemed to be troubled and confused. "Everyone knows us round here," she brought out at last. "It didn't seem like playing the game."

" Ah, I see. You mean it wasn't safe ? "

She remained silent.

" You knew people would find out. You knew you'd be seen. Yes, yes, I see. You couldn't hide here. You were afraid of the village and the village gossip. You were afraid it would reach my ears."

" Put it that way, if you like, Simon."

" But isn't it true ? "

" Oh yes, it's true."

" Whereas in London you were safe ? "

" Yes."

" I wasn't likely to know ! You were very afraid of my finding out, weren't you, Priscilla ? "

" Yes."

" You went to great pains to deceive me ? "

" Yes."

" You were lying to me every day ? "

" No."

" Every time that you went to London you lied ? "

" No. Yes. I tried not to."

" And every time you came back ? "

" I didn't want to lie, Simon."

" But you did all the same."

" Only when I had to."

" And that was every day and all day, every time that you smiled at me, every time you spoke to me. You remember I am sure how you kissed me good-bye each morning when you went up to town. You spun a network of lies round me, Priscilla ; you were very clever at throwing dust in my eyes. You were often affectionate."

" That wasn't lying, Simon."

" You have the audacity ? "

" I never lied to you in that way, Simon."

" You mean to suggest that, while you were another man's mistress, while you were scheming and arranging—— ? "

" I didn't want to hurt you. It was so as not to hurt you."

"You want me to believe that you cared about not hurting me when you knew that if I found out——?"

"I thought you wouldn't find out."

"Ha, there you are, as long as I was ignorant."

"I didn't want to leave you, Simon. I couldn't leave you."

"Why not? Wouldn't it have been more honest?"

"Oh yes."

"Wouldn't it have been infinitely more merciful than this?"

"I didn't want to leave you. I thought you would never know."

"You chose to keep me in ignorance, to make me a laughing stock, to humiliate me and disgrace me, unaware as I was, all for your licentious pleasure, that you might go on defiling your body in secret, indulging with impunity your lust?"

"No, oh, no."

"You chose to live with your lover in secret, to carry on a sordid liaison, to become notorious in London."

"No, no."

"And you say you did this out of consideration for your husband. You still felt, you say, that you owed something to your husband, to the man whom you swore before God to love, honour and obey."

"No. I lied because I had to, but it wasn't for that. It was for you."

"I am your husband, Priscilla."

Slowly she shook her head. "It wasn't that," she said again, and then, speaking with great difficulty and fumbling for her words, she added, "I would have left my husband, any husband, I didn't think about the Marriage part, you see, but I couldn't leave you, Simon. It was like—it was like leaving a child. Don't you see, Simon, don't you see?"

But I couldn't see. I didn't want to. I had no desire to get at the meaning of her strange perverted conscience.

My object was not to understand her, but to make her repent. If she did not realise the horror of what she had done, then she must be made to realise it. If she did not loathe herself, then she must be made loathsome to herself. Whatever it cost me, I must bring her at last to her knees. Though every word she uttered stuck in me like a festering dart, though every fact she gave me went to feed the insatiable hunger of my pain, swelling it to monstrous and unbearable dimensions, still I must go on. I must crucify her, even if I crucified myself in doing it.

How can I tell how much was holy and how much was unholy in my anguish? It was all vile, I suppose, and yet I burned to make Priscilla confess her sin to God. In my imagination I saw her kneeling on the carpet, her body shaken, her pride broken.

I gloated over the prospect.

That is a hideous phrase. I used it unconsciously. Let it stand. It does, alas, describe my state of mind. Why lie to myself now, I who accused Priscilla of lying? To know the truth, to face it, it is for this that I am writing, analysing, sifting all this long confusion of ugly suffering.

I was beside myself with pain. It was as if my bowels were being twisted and squeezed by pincers. Bowels of compassion, the phrase is: bowels of angry agony I knew then.

I wanted my revenge.

Now that I had her in my power, I would wring every horrible drop of that sweetness out of her.

All day I went on questioning her, circling round and round her guilt, approaching her conduct from every angle, coming back again and again to the same things.

When the breakfast gong sounded I sent her down and bade her join me at once after breakfast in the library.

It was a very hot day, I remember. There was a humming of bees in the garden, and the sound of a mowing machine. Through the open window came the scent of new-mown grass.

As the long warm hours passed she became very tired, her forehead grew damp. Her eye sockets were drawn and tight, the lids reddened. Little dents showed in the corners of her nose. So strained were her eyes that I expected to see her squint. She sat very still, holding a rolled-up handkerchief that she sometimes used to wipe the palms of her hands.

"No, Simon. Yes, Simon," she would say, and occasionally, "Simon, must you, must you go on?"

I had no pity on her. How could I have pity? She remained obdurate. She would not deny her love. She would say no word that betrayed any sense of its shameful-ness, its uncleanness. I rung out of her the admission that the hotel in Exminster where she had met him was sordid, and that the landlady had been suspicious, but when I said, "Didn't that give you any feeling of repulsion?" she answered, "Oh no."

"Why did you do so and so?" I would ask, and always she answered, "I wanted to see him." Once she said, "I was desperate."

"Desperate?"

"Yes, I hadn't seen him for ten days." She seemed unconscious of having said anything in the least ridiculous.

And always she came back to the same explanation of her conduct, that seemed to have for her an absolute finality.

"You never thought of running away together?"

"Oh yes."

"You talked of it?"

"Yes."

"More than once?"

"Yes."

"He had urged you before as he urged you last night?"

"Yes."

"You made plans?"

"Yes, that is we—I knew—they couldn't come true."

"Why? Didn't you trust him?"

" Oh yes."

" Why, then ? "

" I knew I would never leave you."

" Though you wanted to so much ? "

" Yes."

" More than anything in the world you wanted to go away with him ? "

" Yes."

" And live with him in sin ? "

" Not in sin."

" In sin, Priscilla, in adultery."

" It seemed beautiful to me," she said. This was late in the afternoon.

I rose and went to the writing-table and pulled a telegraph form out of a drawer. She looked up, startled.

" What are you doing, Simon ? "

" I am writing a telegram to your mother. I shall send for her."

She was on her feet in an instant and rushed towards me.

" No, no," she gasped, " you wouldn't tell mummy, Simon ? "

" Certainly I shall tell her."

" Oh no, Simon, not that, not that. She mustn't know, she mustn't."

" She must, my dear. If I can't bring you to a realisation of your horrible sin perhaps she can."

" Simon, I beg of you, do with me what you like, but don't do this, not this." She was imploring me now, she was on her knees by my chair. " Don't, Simon, don't, not mummy," she entreated. " I'll do anything, Simon, anything, I'll confess anything that you like, I'll try to see what you mean. I'll try to repent. I do, I have always, I mean I've always felt so awfully, awfully sorry. You don't understand, Simon, you don't understand. You think I liked deceiving you. I didn't. I hated it, but I couldn't help it. I was desperate. I couldn't keep away from him. It was so strong, so strong, much, much

stronger than me. I couldn't resist it, Simon, I would have if I could. Oh, I didn't want to hurt you, indeed I didn't want to." She was crying now. I had never seen her cry before. She held up her wet twisting face to me. The tears rolled down into her grimacing mouth. "Don't tell mummy, Simon," she whispered. "It would break her heart."

"It's too late, Priscilla, to think of that now."

I began to write. Suddenly she sprang up, grabbed my hands; tore the paper out of them.

"You shan't do it," she cried. "You shan't. It's a wicked thing to do. If you do it I shall go to Crab to-night."

"And what then, will that save your mother?" I asked calmly. Her anger had made me strangely calm.

She stood transfixed a moment, glaring at me like an animal, then flung herself on her face on the couch and began to shake with a long dry sobbing. The sound was like that of a person being violently sick. I can hear it now.

"I shall send for your mother, Priscilla," I said, standing over her, "but I will tell her nothing. You shall tell her everything yourself."

And I left her.

CHAPTER XII

LADY AGATHA arrived the next morning at ten o'clock. I met her at the station and drove up with her to the house.

"Priscilla and I are in great trouble," I said to her. "She will tell you about it. She is in her room."

I waited downstairs in my study. I waited interminably. The morning dragged into noon. Lunch was announced. Neither Lady Agatha nor Priscilla came down. My mother and I lunched alone. I made a pretence of eating in order to avoid her questions. I knew that she was gulping them down with every morsel of food that she swallowed. She kept looking at me with scared eyes, then would look hurriedly away. She dropped her napkin a dozen times and spilled the wine from her glass. Every now and then she would sigh mysteriously and pucker her mouth.

"Shall I send up a tray, Simon?" she asked at last.

"You might."

"Agatha's had nothing you know. She must be in need of something, just a little something."

"Yes, she might like some refreshment."

"I thought she looked so tired and worried."

"Did you?"

"Yes, didn't you think so?"

"I dare say. I didn't notice."

"Do have a glass of port, Simon."

"No thank you, Mother."

"Oh dear, and you've eaten nothing. You've only pretended. Everyone in this house seems to be ill. No one has eaten a thing for two days. The dishes go back to the pantry just as they come on the table. Cook is quite upset. She really is. She was saying this morning, you know how

touchy she is, that she supposed her cooking didn't suit any more. She was quite hurt at her soufflé not being touched, even I couldn't eat it, even I feel queer, so probably she'll give notice, and she really is a very good cook. It's such a pity now that it's so difficult to get good servants, with the wages they ask since the war, and the questions. 'Is there a cinema palace in the village?' 'Is Creech a lonely place?' 'How far is it to the nearest town?' 'And can they have their day off and every other Sunday?' It's all so tiresome."

Her chatter exasperated me.

"We can do quite well with a plain cook, Mother. Please let this one go."

"But Simon, you *must* be properly——"

"No, Mother, you are wrong. I know your theory, but you are wrong. You have been wrong from the beginning."

"Oh, Simon, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I can't stand any more of this fussing and stuffing. It must stop. We will have the plainest food from now on, and no wine. I do not wish you to serve wine at table any longer, not at any rate as long as I am here. When I leave——"

"When you leave, Simon?" she whispered.

"Yes, I am leaving Creech, Mother, and giving up the living, I have written to the Bishop."

"What's that? What do you say?" She looked at me pitifully, picked up her napkin, wiped her lips, to hide their trembling perhaps.

"I have asked to be sent abroad, Mother."

"Oh, Simon darling!" It was a long wail of infinite distress, sent out beneath her breath, a timid frightened whisper of panic, and then she began to weep into her napkin. I could not bear her tears. I went to her, put my arm round her, stroked her soft grey hair. "Oh, oh," she whimpered weakly. My arm still round her I led her from the dining-room and into my study. There I sat down beside her, holding her withered little hand in mine.

"I cannot stay here any longer, Mother," I said after a little.

"But where will you go? Where? Where?"

"To China perhaps."

"To the heathen?" she gasped.

"Yes, to the heathen."

"And take Priscilla?"

"Yes, take Priscilla."

"She won't go," she snapped out suddenly. I was startled.

"What makes you say that, Mother?"

"Pooh, Priscilla go to the heathen? Not she. She's a heathen herself. But I will go. If you go, I shall go," she repeated with a determined jerk of her head.

I had a swift realisation of what it would mean for her, of what it did mean, leaving Creech and all that it contained, all its fragrant linen cupboards, and shining copper pans and well stocked larders. She would have to give up, she was giving up at that moment, her keys and all her multifarious and minute occupations, her delicious fussing and pottering and her harmless tyranny over docile white-capped maids. She was giving up Minchin and her innocent gossips of the afternoon and the wine cellar, and her special cup of early tea perfectly brewed in her little blue teapot with water that had boiled just three minutes. I saw her packing her box, putting on her bonnet and her pelisse, stepping for the last time into Simpkin's landau, giving a few last instructions to—to whoever was left behind, and going off to China, to the heathen, she who hated to go as far as London and was always afraid of railway accidents on the way, a little old woman giving up her habits and her home in which she had lived for forty years, for no ideal of service, in answer to no call, with no mission, no understanding of what lay before her, with nothing but fear of it and horror, no hope of ever coming back, all for love of her son. My heart was inexpressibly touched. I saw her as heroic. The comical incongruous picture of

her keeping house for me in some town in Inland China made her no less so.

"Dearest, of course I couldn't let you come."

"But I will though, you see if I don't. You shan't go without me, Simon, for you're all that I've got, my darling, all that I've got." She clung to me in silence, then she said, "It's all Priscilla's doing. She's at the bottom of this."

"We won't discuss Priscilla, Mother."

"Well, I know what I know. Do you suppose I'm blind? D'you think I can't see what she's done to you, with her wild goings on and her trips up to town, and slipping out to post her letters in the village? Why the postmistress herself——"

"Hush, Mother."

"No, I'll not hush, Simon. I'm tired of being hushed and all bottled up. She's a wicked girl and I've known it for a long time and you should never have married her. She was bad from the beginning. Why when she was just a young thing Agatha was always worrying. She takes after that blaspheming father of hers and he was a bad man if ever there was one. He's been drunk more than once about here and heard coming home singing late at night at the top of his voice. Wild he was, and Priscilla's wild. You can tell by the way she throws back her head and laughs. Reckless—just like her father."

"Stop, Mother, I cannot allow——"

"It's Lord Willing she's been carrying on with. She's always writing to him, and he to her. I've found scraps in her waste basket. She's so careless and untidy."

"Mother, you didn't?"

"Yes, I did, and once she had been burning a lot of letters but when Molly cleared out the grate there they were, a great packet. I kept them for you. Molly's told me a lot of things she knows, a lot she could tell you. Her young man saw them once in Mordiford Woods. She was——"

"Mother I cannot bear this. Be silent."

There was a knock at the door.

"Her ladyship is in the library," said Minchin's voice, "she asks if she can see you before she leaves."

Agatha Brampton was standing by the window. She turned as I came in and looked at me without speaking. I do not know what I had expected her to look like, but I did not expect what I saw. I quailed before this woman's face. There was no sympathy for me in it, nor any softness. It was an inhuman face, or was it superhuman, or was it dead? I do not know how to describe its stern immobility. It looked like a relic. It looked as if long ago in another age it had been marred and gashed and frozen by suffering. Now it was a permanent unchangeable visage that expressed nothing, nothing that is came out of it towards me. I had no contact with it, I could not speak to it, it was too far away. It was for ever removed, withdrawn to a great distance.

She towered above me. She did not bend her head or droop as she used to do. She seemed immense. She had an awful grandeur.

"Priscilla asks you to divorce her," she said without moving.

"She asks——?" I stammered.

"You to divorce her so that she can marry Lord Willing."

"I do not understand," I faltered. I felt very weak suddenly, as if I were going to faint. I steadied myself, sat down. The room went black. I closed my eyes.

"Quick, he's fainted." It was my mother. She had followed me into the room.

"Be still, Mother. It is nothing. I forbid you to interfere. Please leave the room." I looked at Agatha. Her expression had not changed.

"Let her stay," she said. "It's of no consequence. I have little to say. Will you divorce Priscilla?"

"No, no, I cannot!"

"Because of your faith?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would say that. I will tell her."

She took a step forward.

"Lady Agatha, wait, stop! Is that all? Can you tell me nothing more? Have you had no effect on her?"

"She won't give him up," said this strange woman. I did not know her. I felt that I had never known her."

"Won't give him up? What do you mean? Of course from the moment I found out, it ended. There is no question——"

"She won't give him up," she repeated in a curiously soundless yet loud voice like the voice of a deaf person, "and she says that now it is impossible for her to stay here with you. She asks you to let her go."

"You mean—you mean?"

"She intends to go to him."

"And to live with him in adultery? And you will allow it?" I almost screamed. "You, you, are going to countenance such a thing?"

"Be quiet," she said sternly. "I can do no more now than I have done. Let your mother take you to your room. Priscilla is beyond your power and mine. She has cut herself off. She has chosen. She must face the future alone."

I cried out again then I scarcely know what. "Never, never, I'll not let her go," words of that kind. Lady Agatha crossed to the door while I raved. Aloof she was, almost arrogant, almost like Priscilla, yet utterly different. Haggard and old, terribly old.

I was frightened at the thought of her going. She was to have saved us. I had counted on her to bring Priscilla back to me. Now she was abandoning me. I blurted this out frantically.

"Can't you save me?" I cried. "Can't you get her back? Can't you make her see that I love her still? What am I to do without her. What will become of me when she's gone? She cannot know, she cannot under-

stand. Tell her, tell her. Have you no pity? Has she none? I will take her away. Even before I knew this I had decided to take her away. We will begin again. I will win her back. She promised never to leave me. Did she tell you that?"

Lady Agatha stood with her hand on the doorknob.

"She is lost, Simon," she said.

"No, no, it can't be. All my prayers—for years I have prayed—God must answer. It is impossible that He should not answer. Pray with me now. Let us pray together now. He is with us." She seemed to hesitate, to be queerly reluctant. Then she said, "Very well, Simon," and fell on her knees.

At this moment the door flew open and my friend Beckitt strode in. How he had gained admittance I do not know. He had found no one about, I suppose, and had simply walked through the house looking for me. He wasn't one to hesitate at closed doors. Certainly it would never have occurred to him to knock at the door of a public place like a drawing-room. Anyhow there he was and we three were already on our knees. My mother half rose from hers. Agatha did not move. I do not believe that she heard him or was aware until afterwards that he had joined us. She was always like that when she prayed. The intensity of her concentration was so great that she became blind and deaf, but I saw, oh quite distinctly. I took in every detail of his rough untidy appearance, his sallow face, his disordered red hair, his long red wrists and big dirty hands, and yet, though I shivered with repulsion I had at the same time a feeling of wild vindictive joy as I motioned him to his knees and began to pray, beseeching God to bring Priscilla back to me and to save her at the eleventh hour.

Verily I was having my revenge—four of us there were, imploring God together on behalf of Priscilla who was so proud, my mother who hated her, Beckitt whom she loathed, Agatha Brampton, whose heart she had broken, and I her husband whom she had betrayed.

We were still on our knees when the door again opened. I looked up: Priscilla stood there, staring at us.

Beckitt's voice swelled out into a loud booming, "Oh Heavenly Father, we beseech thee, pluck this brand from the burning; save, oh, save our erring sister."

She stared fascinated from one of us to the other. For an instant as she gazed at Beckitt's broad back and muddy boots her jaw dropped, giving her quite an idiotic expression, then her face twisted into a queer, disgusted grimace and she began to shudder, but when her eyes came to rest on her mother they were frightened.

"Get down on your knees," I commanded, "and pray to God. He is here in this room, you are in His Presence."

She stared fascinated at Lady Agatha, who was kneeling close beside her, her head up and back, her eyes closed, her hands crossed on her breast. She appeared to be in a trance. She appeared utterly unconscious of Priscilla's presence.

"Mother," whispered Priscilla, "Mother, what is it? What are you doing? Mother look at me?" Lady Agatha opened her eyes and looked up into her daughter's face. I saw her eyes, I saw that last look of unutterable longing, of intense supplication. Mute she was and motionless, and worn and old, not stern now, not inhuman, but divinely tender. Her grey hair untidy under the long black veil, her big hands crossed on her meagre chest, her garments heavy on the floor, I can see her now, an old, supplicating woman kneeling to her child.

Priscilla faltered, her face went crimson, then deathly white. She put out a hand as if to touch Lady Agatha's shoulder, drew it back, looked at me, looked at my mother's bowed back, looked at Beckitt, gave one more convulsing shudder and jerked up her head.

"No, no, I cannot," she whispered, and turning rushed from the room.

CHAPTER XIII

I DID not try to see her again that night. Perhaps if I had—who knows? If I had not given in to my exhaustion I might even then have stopped her. But no: I know that my allowing myself to be put to bed with a hot water bottle made no difference. Nothing made any difference. All the same I cannot get that hot water bottle out of my mind. It haunts me. It has become a symbol of failure, of my disintegration. My mother put it to my icy feet. It was soothing, delicious. So was the hot milk and brandy she gave me. I drank it greedily. She must have put a great deal of brandy in it. I felt a glow, a warmth. A luxurious drowsiness crept over me. I went to sleep with my mother sitting beside me.

The next morning Priscilla was gone. That was a year ago, and I am still here. I cannot go away, I am waiting for Priscilla to come back. I have given up the living. I do not preach any more. There is a new Vicar now. I never see him. I never see anyone. I do not go out of the house. I am waiting for Priscilla to come back so that I can look God in the face again.

I drove her away. I mean I let her go. There is that hot water bottle. If I hadn't——

My mother does as she likes with me. She has changed my room. I sleep in the west bedroom now, the green room, in a soft bed. There is an eighteenth century Chinese wallpaper on the walls, very pretty. They made them in China, so my father told me once, for English houses in Queen Anne's time. This one has a pale green ground, the colour of new leaves in spring, and white cherry trees in bloom and white storks. I do not care for it, though I know it is pretty, just as I do not care for the soft bed that

I sink into every night. I do not care for anything. The sunlight that floods my room in the morning when Minchin brings in my tea and pulls back the curtains gives me no pleasure, neither does the rain affect me when it beats against the windows. Priscilla loved the sun. She would bask in it like a cat. I keep thinking of her. I do not like to go into the garden, for always when I go I expect to find her there, weeding, or snipping away at the rose bushes with her scissors. I detest the rose garden. The white roses are leprous. They have a sickening smell. They smell terribly at night. On moonlight nights especially. On moonlight nights I am frightened. I lock myself in against the horrid fascination of the garden. It draws me. Sometimes I resist. Sometimes I give in to it, creep out, go down to the summerhouse and, sitting there alone, listen to lovers' voices.

Where is Priscilla now? I do not know. I think that I was told that she had gone to California, or New Mexico. She wrote to me from Paris asking me to divorce her. There is no divorce. How can she suppose that I could divorce her if I would? She is my wife. She is living in adultery, but she is my wife. I am waiting for her to come back to me. She is my wife and she will come back to me. God will bring her back. Her lover will tire of her. His lust satiated, he will find her a nuisance. He will break her heart and then she will come back, so I wait, I do nothing.

At first, when I found her gone, I was feverishly agitated. I went up to London the same day. I spent a week in London looking for her. My mother went with me. We stayed at our old lodgings in Ebury Street where I used to stay when I came down from Oxford and where my father always stayed when he was in town.

Has anyone ever tried to find a woman who is in hiding in London?

London is a monster. Its maw swallows you up. You drown in its teeming belly.

The streets are rivers of lead, avalanches of iron. Policemen stand miraculously in the midst of the crashing current. Great burly, beefy brutes endowed with some uncanny power over the elements of destruction, they lift their hands. The avalanche is arrested. You pass in safety between the motionless walls of the traffic. More than once I was snatched from the jaws of death by those beings.

I was nervous. The unaccustomed noise dazed me. I did not always see where I was going. Often there was a haze before my eyes and a heaviness under my feet. The buildings seemed to lean forward, the ground to rise up. Sometimes I caught sight of some one on the other side of the street that looked like Priscilla and would rush into the *mêlée* trying to get to her. Men shouted, horns hooted, wheels, thousands of wheels were grinding. Once in Piccadilly Circus I thought I saw her go by in a taxi. I ran after her waving my umbrella. I stumbled. A policeman picked me up kindly enough and stood me on the pavement. A telegraph boy brought me my hat. Two corpulent, bloated women who were sitting by the fountain with baskets of flowers laughed at me. "He's balmy," said one to the other. After that my mother insisted on accompanying me when I went into the more crowded districts. She would trail after me, panting, breathless, through the streets. "Not so fast, Simon, not quite so fast," she would gasp and clutch my arm. I saw our reflection in mirrors and windows as we hurried along. Once I saw two strange little figures scurrying towards me in the tunnel of an arcade, a distracted, emaciated man in a dusty clergyman's coat that flapped round his dusty trousers; he moved his legs queerly; his face was pallid and sweaty, his hat misshapen. A little old woman hobbled beside him, clinging to his arm. Their heads bobbed out of unison, his went up while hers went down. She couldn't keep step with him. They both looked exhausted but were in a feverish hurry—two bewildered, worried people from the provinces, something country bred and old-fashioned

about them. All this I saw in a flash before I recognised them. It was my mother and myself of course.

It was late in July. The West End of London was in gala attire. A brilliant season was drawing to a close, the *Times* said. Gay flowers bloomed in the window boxes of Mayfair. Beautiful women floated through the dusty streets in filmy frocks and fragile slippers, their faces shadowy under the broad brims of drooping hats. Under every brim I looked for Priscilla. Bond Street was one glittering display of costly baubles. I haunted Bond Street. A hundred times I imagined that I saw Crab Willing's tall figure lounging there. Every shining top hat, every smart morning coat, every long, moulded, muscular back reminded me of him, teased me with its resemblance, lured me for an instant with a flicker of hope. I would slide up to him, pass by as close as I could and peer round into his face to be greeted by the blank stare of a stranger. But of course I did other more sensible things than this. I went to every place that Priscilla had ever mentioned to me in London. I called first at Puss Featherstone's flat, then at Lady Sidlington's house. Neither was at home. I went back repeatedly, but I never found them in. "Her ladyship is out," the Sidlingtons' bland butler would say.

"Can you tell me when she will be in?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"Are you expecting her for lunch?"

"No, sir, her ladyship gave no orders for lunch."

"This afternoon then?"

"I don't know, sir; I'm sorry I couldn't say, sir."

He was immovable. He would stand impassively in the door. I would go wearily away. I wrote to her and had no answer. I telephoned early in the morning. Her ladyship was asleep. I telephoned in the evening. Her ladyship could not come to the 'phone, she was dressing. Would I please leave a message? At length when I called late one hot afternoon I was informed by the servant who

knew me well by this time but never gave any sign of ever having laid eyes on me before that her ladyship had gone out of town.

"She left no message for Sir Simon Birch?"

"Yes, sir; she left a note, sir, in case you called again."

He turned, leaving the door open, and took a tray from a marble table in the outer hall. It held an envelope addressed to me. I took it and went down the steps. To the right, on the other side of Park Lane, there was a vision of refreshing green. Beyond the iron gratings, past the whizzing procession of shining limousines, I could see children playing and leaves dancing against the sunny sky. I was very tired. I crossed into the Park and sat down on a bench opposite Grosvenor Gate and opened Lady Sidlington's note.

"Dear Simon," she wrote, "I'm so sorry, but I couldn't see you. It would have done no good. If you are looking for Priscilla, please believe that I write as a friend when I beg you to stop trying to find her. It is useless."

The late afternoon sun streamed over the grass. It shone on the twinkling jewelled windows of the houses in Park Lane. Children's voices sounded behind me, gay, shrill little piping voices of play. Men and women passed me ceaselessly, cheerful people, laughing and chatting. A woman twirled a cherry coloured sunshade over her shoulder. It framed her pretty dark head. She was laughing and looking up caressingly into the face of the man beside her. The motors passed swiftly, endlessly. Feathers, jewels, furbelows, neat little hats, smiling rosy faces, pale faces satiated with pleasure, long white throats encircled with pearls, bloated, contented faces of men bending toward these, faces of gluttons, wooden, self-satisfied faces, glad, lustful faces, all these flashed past. Life—zest, every motor was packed with it. Smooth vehicles filled full like shining sealed boxes, packed full of the savourous ointment of pleasure, soundlessly they passed me.

Wistfully I watched the pageant. Cruel was London that summer afternoon. It took no account of me. Why had I never tasted of its rich, succulent life? I might have. Priscilla had tasted it. Priscilla had been a part of it. I was a stranger, a vagabond. An old man in a worn brown coat and battered hat was asleep on a bench near by, his head laid back on the wooden support. His sunken, unshaven face was turned sightlessly to the sky. His mouth was open, his feet sprawled. He and I were kin.

As I paused at the Marble Arch on my way to Victoria Street, a taxi passed. I saw a man and a woman in the body of it, locked in each other's arms, oblivious, mouth to mouth, faces merged one into the other.

I called at Crab Willing's flat in Jermyn Street. The lift attendant eyed me suspiciously.

"His lordship is out of town," he said; "he's not been here for a week past."

A forbidding fellow with a lascivious, hypocritical leer. He knew Priscilla. He must have seen her a hundred times. His cap was pulled over one eye. He seemed amused in a surly, secretive way at the sight of me. I did not leave my name.

I started to go the round of the hotels. I called at Claridge's, at the Ritz, at the Berkeley, the Savoy, the Hyde Park. Sleek, immaculate young men replied to my monotonous question that neither Lord Willing nor Lady Birch were resident in the hotel. I obtained a list of all the hotels in London. I found that there were several hundred altogether. I telephoned to a dozen or more. I studied their names at night thinking that somehow if I concentrated on the printed list, one name, the name, would start out at me, different from all the rest. Occasionally it happened so. My eye would be fixed by the letters that made up the Connaught or the Vandyke, and I would rush round there, however late it was, convinced at last that I had found them, only to be told that neither Lord Willing nor Lady Birch were in residence.

One day I had a letter from Puss Featherstone. She asked me not to bother to call again. She had not seen Priscilla, she said. She did not know anything of her whereabouts, but she imagined that she had gone abroad. I knew that she was lying, but her mention of Europe gave me a new inspiration. If Priscilla were going abroad she must get a passport. I was certain that she had not had a passport while at Creech. She had had no occasion for one. The question had been raised when she had suggested our going to Italy for Easter the year before. I would trace her through the Passport Office. If she had applied for a passport I would find her.

I was at the Passport Office long before it opened. I stood in the rain for half an hour or more. I was patient; I was confident, I did not mind the dripping umbrella behind me that was pouring a little rivulet down my collar. I was the first to get through the opened doors. A being in uniform touched his cap.

"British passport, sir?"

"No—that is——"

"This is the Passport Office, sir."

"I know, I want——"

"If you are applying for a passport, straight on through the doors opposite."

"I'm not applying for a passport."

"Come to the wrong place, sir, then."

"Not at all, not at all, I want information."

He stroked his chin, looked pensively at my clerical collar.

"Just take a seat, sir. I'll see what I can do for you."

I took a seat. I remained in it for an hour.

Intensely preoccupied people came in and relieved people went out. Every man and woman in England seemed to be in desperate need of a passport, but no one I noticed who came in seemed at all sure of whether he was going to get what his heart desired or not. No one seemed to know what was going to happen to him in there behind those swinging doors. It was like going to the dentist's

or the Inquisition. They came out, however, victorious, briskly buttoning their coats, contentedly clasping their bags.

I waited interminably. Several times I accosted the attendant who had put me into that chair.

"Just a minute, sir, just a minute. All in good time, all in good time." He would wave me off. At last he loomed over me—"Step this way, sir."

I was led through the magic doors. A long queue of people were waiting before a desk. A clean-shaven young man, very bored and patient, stepped out from somewhere and asked me my business.

"You want your passport renewed?"

"No, I want——"

"Visas are obtained at the Consulates. If it's a French visa you want——"

"I don't want a passport at all," I insisted. "I've not come about my passport, I've come about my wife's passport," I ended briskly in a flash of genius.

"Passports must be applied for in person. Your wife must come herself."

"But she has, that is I think she has. That's what I want to find out."

He seemed to be going to sleep. He murmured something unintelligible.

I felt that in another moment I would burst into tears, and the thought of bursting into tears in the presence of that sleepy young man stung me to fury. I pulled out my card.

"Take that, my good fellow," I said, "to the Head of this Department of the State and say that I shall be glad to be informed whether this office has issued a passport during the last week to Priscilla Birch, wife of Sir Simon Birch, as written here."

He gave me a long, vague look, bowed, and faded away. After an interval he came back. "Please take a seat, sir. Your inquiry is being looked into, though it is not, sir,

quite in order, that is to say, sir," he drawled, " the Office will try to oblige you."

I refused a seat. I said that I would wait where I was. He looked resigned, and washed his hands of me. It was a brisk young lady with bobbed hair and spectacles who at last brought me my answer. There was no record of any passport having been issued during the last fortnight to anyone by the name of Priscilla Birch, but Priscilla Ann Birch, wife of Sir Simon Birch, aged twenty-eight, residing at Creech St. Michael's, had had a passport issued to her on the 15th May, 1919, that is to say three months before.

I thanked the young woman and went wearily away. I was too exhausted even to wonder very much for what purpose Priscilla had wanted a passport in the month of May. Drearily, as if talking to someone else whom it might concern, I muttered, " She probably went with him to Paris or somewhere during that week when she said she was in town."

That night I pored over the map of London. I spread it out on the green plush tablecloth in our stuffy sitting-room under the high glare of the electric light and travelled with my aching, feverish eyes the network of streets. From the London docks to Hammersmith, from Golder's Green to Battersea, up and down, late into the night I wandered through teeming, stinking slums, where dark alleys yawned and the huge funnels of ships showed over huddled roofs, through the silent, entranced city of closed banks and offices, along the shadowed, mysterious and deserted embankments of the heavy river, barges were embedded in its sulky bosom, red lights glowed dimly, bridges spanned the night, taut from one house to another, trains rushing by in the air, sparks flying up ; past the Houses of Parliament and the silvery towers of Westminster Abbey, on through the sleepy pocket of Dean's Yard, with Big Ben booming out from its tower behind me, into St. James's Park where homely waterfowl slept, heads tucked under their wings, and up past Buckingham Palace, through bleak Belgravia

and select, prim Sloane Street. On I went then through the dreary suburban desert of South Kensington with its endless ungainly homes, milk bottles in entry ways, lights showing through yellow glass above dull, self-satisfied doors. The mountainous mass of Olympia loomed on my right, and beyond it another desert of smaller, dingier houses, endless interminable streets of greasy houses, grimy with slippery soot. They led on, they led on, there was no end of them. Each house embedded in the next house, indistinguishable, each house crammed full to bursting with men and women and children, weary, uncouth men, blousy with beer, gaunt and slatternly women, child-bearing women, bodies deformed with child-bearing, all their young prettiness gone, rickety children, children whimpering in their sleep among the soiled bedclothes, all the snoring, the heavy breathing, the whimpering, merging together, rising in a dull, dim murmur through the low roofs to the heavy brooding night. I heard it. Through my open window I heard it, the immense, subdued, muffled murmur of the sleeping city, the unconscious, wordless hushed lament of ten million British souls.

And I knew at last that I would never find Priscilla. We came back to Creech the next day.

I have not been away since. Only once have I been beyond the village. That was when I went to Jericho Sands to see Lord Moone. That was terrible. That was a mistake.

And so I do nothing. I wait and remember. I wait for Priscilla to come back. I wait for the sound of her vigorous, nervous step in the hall, for the sound of her deep, strong voice. I wait for the door to burst open. She will stand there. She will hold out her hands. She will say—"I forgive you Simon." That is what she says. That is what she does. She comes back to forgive me. When she does that I shall be healed.

Yet she is a sinful woman. How then can she bring healing in her hands? I am very distressed, very troubled.

How can this be? What does it mean?

There are two human souls concerned in this business, mine and Priscilla's. I know my own now. The writing of this confession has shown it up to me pitilessly. Ha! What a farce! A man of God, the shepherd of a flock, the supposed companion of Christ! Say it! Shout it! Let everyone know it! Humbug, impostor, sneak, eavesdropper, busybody, that's what you are, Simon Birch, a petty man with a petty mind. Puffed up with vanity. God, how you puffed yourself out! Communed with God, did you? You couldn't even commune with the devil. You weren't big enough. You stewed in your own juice, intoxicated yourself with the feeble fumes of your own imagination.

You wanted, so you said, to save Priscilla's soul from Hell. Oh, miserable liar. You wanted her to kneel to you, not to God. You set yourself up as an idol, expected her to worship you, ridiculous pigmy that you are!

She is five times, ten times, a hundred times more noble than you. For all her adultery you know that this is true. What does it matter to you that she broke God's Commandments and refused to accept Christ as her Lord and Master? How do you know for that matter that she didn't? She wouldn't pray, not when you were around anyway. Why should she? What right had you to overhear her prayers? Isn't the prayer of a human heart meant for the ears of God alone? Eavesdropping again, Simon, trying to surprise the secret secrets of her shy, her infinitely modest, soul. Prying, prying into the locked chambers of her breast, wanting to pull out all the little hidden, frail, vital, formless and beautiful, pitifully palpitating things of her heart, her essence; you wanted to spill it on the ground at your feet. Disembowel her rather, that would be less monstrous.

It is true, it is true! God pity me! Have pity, You, the One Who know, Who Watch, Who record.

And yet, and yet, my yearning toward you was not a lie. Driven into the last ditch I still say it. With my back

to the wall, nothing left to cover my nakedness, no tatter of self-esteem, ugly and mean and corrupt as I am, still I say it. I did love You, oh, my God, and You, Jesus of Nazareth, Man of pity, of many sorrows.

We are all gone astray like lost sheep. Priscilla, Priscilla, where are you? Don't you hear? Doesn't my voice reach you? Go my voice, go out through the night, through the dark, go swiftly across the earth! Do not be frightened by the rolling waves of the senseless sea. There is a shore, there is a land over there, where she stands. I see her looking out, gallant, brave, helpless, doomed; doomed like me. Priscilla, we are lost, you and I, lost in the immense dark, in the great infinite emptiness. Come back, Priscilla, I am lonely and afraid.

CHAPTER XIV

I HAVE written nothing for six months. I have been ill, brain fever, cerebral anæmia, something of that sort I believe. The house has been full of nurses and doctors. I am well again now.

During my fever I dreamed that there was no God. I saw the beginning of the world. It was an accident. A ball of fire was spinning in the Heavens. A lump of glowing stuff, white hot, flew off it. "The earth," a voice called. "Behold the birth of our planet." Dizzily it went spinning through space like a top. It circled round me, forever spinning. Then I saw that it was cooling in the icy envelope of emptiness that surrounded it. Its surface turned from fiery red to grey. It was crawling now with vermin. "Protoplasm, amoebæ, the first forms of life," said the voice. Like a fungus it spread over the surface of the globe, a diseased and poisonous growth, slimy, a slimy film. Something stirred in it, some blind impulse, some senseless urge. The glaucous mass took shape. Of itself it created out of itself the power to move. On those spots of the earth where the sun warmed the now chilled surface, the slimy life-forms became four-footed beasts, and the beasts in turn became men. Time fled past my ears in a hurricane as I watched. Ten thousand years passed swift as a cyclone. I saw time whirling. The æons were flying spirals, scurrying off into nothingness, vanishing in a wink. And I observed that the men on the earth were unaware of the meaning of time and were building houses of stone and keeping records of their minute activities. They swarmed like ants, very busy. A million were born every second, a million dropped dead, were swept away into the ground. The life impulse had reached

its zenith. The urge of procreation, the spawn of millions, swarming larvæ. "As it began so shall it end," said the voice. "In a little while it will be done. Life will disappear as it came. In a hundred thousand years of their measurement there will be nothing, soon, as you watch; but look, come closer, see how they cling to it, life, the ephemeral, vanishing thing, their only possession."

And I drew near and I saw the race of man toiling endlessly. I saw the whole race of man from the beginning, stretching round and round the earth in a long chain, a gang of slaves, like a gang of black men, each one chained to the next one with iron shackles. I heard their groans, their sighs. I saw the sweat dripping from their bodies. I saw them die, so tired they were, they dropped so tired into their graves, and each one as he fell clung to something. One had a red bandana handkerchief in his hand. He wanted to take it with him.

"Dust to dust," said the voice.

"But where do they go?" I cried. "What becomes of their souls? What of the hope they have?"

"They go nowhere," answered the voice. "They go back where they came from. They are an accident. They have no souls. There is no hope. They only imagine because they suffer. Look ahead."

And I looked and lo the earth was cold and no life stirred any longer on its frozen surface. It went past me spinning, for ever spinning, and disappeared.

But now this nightmare is finished. I am calm. I no longer trouble about these things. I take the medicine my mother gives me, and sit quietly in the garden. I have a sure hope. "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that some day I shall see Him face to face."

There remains the question of the authority of the Church and the infallible truth of the Word of God.

I know that the existence of God is not in doubt. There have been moments when I have doubted it, moments during the writing of these confessions when my brain has

been suddenly illuminated by the red flare of horrible suspicion, but always I come back to the final, the unreasoned and unreasonable knowledge that He is.

Nor am I so colossally impudent as to suppose that my own sinfulness is a proof that there is no God. If it has any meaning at all, if it has any point, if I am to be taken as an object lesson, then I, the cad that I am, am a witness to the truth that I am damned without Christ to save me.

I have been driven into the last ditch. I am content to rest there. I stand with my back to the wall, the wall of the Church. I lean all my weight against it. I am nothing. My brain is nothing. I have understood nothing. I take refuge in the authority of the Church of Christ which was founded by His chosen Apostles, and since I cannot understand, I accept without understanding its doctrine that is based upon the Holy Scriptures and upon the living words that Christ spoke with His own lips to His disciples nineteen hundred years ago.

Were it not for this I know that I should go mad.

As it is I am at peace, even though I am again bothered and tormented by Priscilla's friends. Since my convalescence they have been after me.

They want me to divorce her. They keep at me. They think that they will wear down my resistance. Lady Sidlington and Puss Featherstone and William Tweedle, they have all been here. They do not understand. I am not resisting them. I am helpless. Even if I knew that Priscilla would never come back to me, even if I wanted to be rid of her, I could not undo our marriage.

There is no way of undoing it.

I did not refuse to see them as they refused to see me in London when I was looking for her. I listened to them patiently. I heard their arguments that had no bearing whatever upon the issue.

William Tweedle came first. My interview with him was brief. He came to tell me that he hoped I would behave like a gentleman. I replied that if behaving like a gentle-

man meant that I must throw over the doctrine of the Christian faith for the thing they called the social code of the world, I was afraid I could not oblige him.

"Your father had a great sense of decency," he said then.

"I cannot turn to my father for advice now, Tweedle," I answered wearily. "He is dead, and even you do not know what he would do if he were in my place." He started to interrupt me. I silenced him. "No one can help me with worldly advice. I am not interested in what the world thinks of this matter. It is a question for God and my own conscience."

"So you condemn Priscilla to live the rest of her life——"

"She can come back. The only right course for her is to come back to me. I am ready to receive her."

He didn't stay long after that. He grew angry and very red in the face and called me unpleasant names. He went away clumsily, his broad, stocky shoulders bowed as if under a weight, his grizzled head lowered. I watched him go slowly away, tapping the ground testily with his stick. I saw him shake his head. A heavy, disgruntled old man, trudging off to his musty old books, his carpet slippers, his bottle of port. My mother says he drinks far more than is good for him, that he will drop down some day with apoplexy.

It is a pity. I am not angry with him. I am no longer angry with anyone.

Lady Sidlington, when she came, was more tender with me. Her voice was sweet, her face wistful. She said she was sure that although Priscilla had treated me very badly, still I would, being the kind of man I was, forgive her. She could not believe that I grudged Priscilla her happiness.

"But isn't she happy?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, she is now."

"But she won't be, you think? It will end?"

"I think she and Crab will always care for one another," she said simply. "They made one feel that. There was something so solid and—and reliable about them, about the

two of them together. One recognised the difference. One has—had experiences—seen one's friends come to grief. Things of that sort so seldom are a success, you know, but here one felt that even if they weren't happy it wouldn't matter. There was something more important in it than happiness."

"Then if it doesn't matter?"

She looked at me gravely. "What I mean is that they'll stick to each other whatever happens, but that they may be miserable. Do you want them to be miserable, Simon? They can't come home, you see, till you make it possible. Their friends would stand by them of course, but it wouldn't be the same. Priscilla would suffer. Crab has had to resign from his regiment. He couldn't take up his old life. She would feel that, and then of course there are the Moones. It is very hard on the Moones."

I said that I detested everything the Moones stood for.

I had had an interview with Lord Moone.

She breathed, "Yes, I know."

"He told you?"

She shook her hand. "No. It was Violet. Moone doesn't talk of things. He never mentions Crab."

"He didn't send you then?"

"Oh, no."

"Lady Moone perhaps?"

"No. They don't know that I've come. They wouldn't approve, I imagine."

"Too proud to ask a favour, I suppose."

"Yes, much too proud. And I'm not sure that they would want you to release Priscilla. I don't know what they think. They don't, as I say, discuss things with me or with anyone. It is quite possible, however, that they would prefer that you shouldn't."

"I don't follow."

"On the assumption that if you don't, you see, he'll get tired of her and give her up."

"And come home?"

"Yes, and come home."

"I see. And wouldn't that be the best thing all round?"

"For them perhaps, not for Crab."

"Why not for Crab?"

"He'd never be happy again," she said.

"Not even if Priscilla came back to me?"

"Then least of all, Simon." Her voice was full of pity. I took her pity, I swallowed it painfully. I remained very quiet.

"So you don't feel as they do?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I want Crab and Priscilla to be happy."

"And you think that if I divorced Priscilla?"

"Then she would, of course, be accepted by the family. And they like her, you know, really, though Vi was dreadfully angry and upset. Lord Moone likes her particularly. They'd soon be friends again. They used to get on so well together, pottering round the greenhouses. Priscilla's exactly the kind of daughter-in-law for him. He often spoke to me of her before this happened, before they went off. He called her a fine, upstanding sort of girl. He never says much, you know, but he appreciated her in his own way."

"So you want me to make it possible for her to become Viscountess Willing and in time Marchioness of Moone? You want her to come back here and live at Jericho Sands, not a stone's throw from this house?"

"I know it is all awfully hard on you," she murmured.

"It's not that. That has nothing to do with it. My feelings aren't concerned in this. Since when has anyone considered what I feel? Why should you now? Why should I? You are asking me to do the impossible, that's all. I am a member of the Church of England. Priscilla is my wife. I cannot lend myself to this godless and heathenish farce. How can I be a party to such a public flaunting of the laws of God? Priscilla, my wife, the wife of Lord Willing, and I agree to it? Priscilla whom God

joined to me in holy matrimony, I hand on to another? Two husbands! I am to divide her with Crab Willing? Who would marry them? Not a curate in England could do so. A civil ceremony would do, you say? A civil contract takes precedence over the marriage sacrament, and I, a Vicar of Christ's Church, am to be a party to such an arrangement? I cannot."

She too went away at last dejectedly, seeming to reproach me, her lovely head drooping. It was very strange. They all said the same thing. Not one of them seemed to understand. They all assumed that it was because I wanted revenge that I refused to divorce Priscilla. Puss Featherstone bluntly accused me of this. It was only the other day that she was here.

"You want to wreck her life," she said, "because she wrecked yours."

She had brought down a letter from Priscilla to show to me. It was written from some ranch in the west of America, in New Mexico.

"It is wonderful here," Priscilla wrote. "We ride all day in the desert. It's a painted desert, all streaks of colour, vermilion and gold and a funny shade of turquoise blue, and the clouds make violet shadows. High clouds. The skies are high. It never rains. The days are sizzling, the nights cool with a sharp nip in the air. We sleep on the roof of our adobe house under the stars. One can see far away the long line of the sierras, such a wide horizon. Crab is making a garden, but we haven't really enough water. Sometimes I long for a good sopping English day.

"I am afraid Simon will never give in about the divorce. It's a pity. Crab worries some. He thinks I'm homesick. I know he is sometimes. I wonder quite a lot about Simon. I heard he was ill. I hope he's all right and beginning to forget. I'm afraid he's awfully lonely. Crab hates to have me worry about him. He gets jealous. Aren't men funny?

"Sometimes I wonder if Simon thinks I will come back

I hope not. That would be awful. To think of him waiting endlessly. If only he knew that whatever happens I shall always belong to Crab, even if he came to hate me—Crab I mean, even if I sent him away.”

I read this letter with intense interest. I held it carefully in my hands. My hands tingled to it. I longed to ask Puss Featherstone to let me keep it. It was something of Priscilla's. It was Priscilla. It had come from her. She wrote it scarcely a month ago. There before my hungry eyes was the large boyish scrawl, the funnily shaped t's and y's, the usual misspelled words. Careless, untidy, sturdy Priscilla. I saw her scribbling it impatiently, in haste to be done with the tiresome business of writing; frowning, making the blot in the middle of the page. I heard her say, “Dash it all, there's a blot.”

I looked up to find Puss eyeing me obliquely under lowered lids. She must have expected the letter to make a very different impression from the one it actually did make on me.

“You like it?” she asked bitinglly.

“I do.”

“It gives you pleasure?”

“Yes; oh, yes.”

“Ah, how strange you are!”

“Am I?”

“You see what's happening? You're not stupid. You read between the lines.”

“Yes, yes. It is all just as I thought, just what I hoped.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“She is not happy,” I cried.

“She is wretched,” she echoed.

“She is worrying, troubled, homesick.”

“Beastly homesick. If she weren't feeling pretty bad she wouldn't say a word, bless her heart. It's the longest letter she's ever written in her life.”

“Exactly,” I cried again. “It proves I was right. He's tired of her already.”

"Oh," cried Puss, suddenly quiet, "so that's what you read into it? Well, you're dead wrong."

I smiled at her. I felt happier than I had felt for years.

"She'll be home soon," I murmured half to myself.

"You are mad, Simon. She'll never come back to you. Haven't you read the letter? Don't you see what she says? If Crab left her to-morrow—but there's no question of that. He'll never leave her, never, and you're a fool to think so."

"You mean he'd stick to her even when he got tired of her?"

"He'll never get tired of her. He's not that kind. One can't use such stupid expressions in connection with Crab. And besides, one doesn't get tired of Priscilla, she's not that kind, either. He loves her. Don't you feel that? He loves her far more than you do. You don't begin to know. You can't touch him, you're not in the same class."

I looked at her amazed, and brought out, "You are in love with him yourself. You were and you still are."

She flushed crimson under her swarthy paint and powder. Her cheeks were tinted a peculiar Indian red, her lips were vermilion. Her face was decorated like a savage. Now all that pattern of brilliant tawny red and brown was suffused from underneath with a hot flood of mounting blood.

"What's that got to do with it?" she barked out hoarsely.

"Only this. I don't understand why you care what I do, why you interfere. If he comes back—well——"

"You're a miserable creature, Simon," she enunciated then very distinctly. "So you think I want Priscilla to be unhappy so that I ——"

"But you said just now that she was wretched."

"Bosh. Of course she is, sometimes. She's bound to be. She's worried because she thinks Crab's homesick and Crab's worried because he thinks she is, and so they'll

go on, till you put things right for them and give them a chance."

"A chance?"

"Of a normal, decent sort of life. Can't you see, man, what you are doing to them? Divorce her for God's sake and let her come home and hold her head up."

"I can't divorce her."

"Why not? Oh, I know. Peggy told me. I don't give that for your religious scruples. Neither do you. You want your revenge, that's all. You want her to suffer. Well, she'll suffer all right I suppose, but she's got something all the same that you can never take away from her, always remember that. She's got her man, her mate, her love. She's complete, and however hard her life may be its real, its real, Simon, a sight more real than all your visions and prayers and things. Do, for pity's sake, stop being a Christian for one minute and be a human being, my dear."

It was all very remarkable. She impressed me. She was somehow impressive. For all her grotesque appearance, her loathsome scent, the aura of sensuality that swam round her, breathing from her clothes, coming out at me in waves, she seemed for the moment almost grand. Fiery she was and bitter as quinine, and brutal.

"If you don't do it, Simon, you're a damned soul, and you'll know what hell is."

Those were her words. She flung them at me, standing over me, flung them like stones at my head.

"I can't do it, I can't do it, never will I do it," I reiterated. "It's no good your bullying me. Priscilla will come back. I know she will come back. Her conscience is troubling her even now. That is the voice of God in her heart, she will listen, she must listen, I know that she will come."

"You poor fool," were Puss Featherstone's last words, "You poor duped fool."

I wonder.

PART THREE
TWEEDLE CONCLUDES

CHAPTER I

SIMON's narrative breaks off here. The remainder of his MSS. is for the most part incoherent. It has a sound but no sense. Reading it has been like listening to the nerve-wracking beat of a tom-tom. Its sound is the sound of the hammer of human pain thumping against the iron wall of the unknown. Through the agonised gibberish of the words one hears his imprisoned mind beating against the gong of his suffering that resounds interminable to his endless repeated questions. "Where is God? Who and What is He that He allows such things to happen? How is it possible that Priscilla being what she was could do what she did?" The enigma of her happiness and his anguish, the two in constant juxtaposition, and God countenancing both.

Milly has told me that during the months when he must have been sickening with terror of the insanity that he felt coming on, he would turn again and again to writing, begging piteously when she tried to keep him away from his desk according to the doctor's orders, to be allowed to "work" as he called it, and saying that he found relief that way. She says that even now in the sanatorium where she visits him every Saturday, he still scribbles. She showed me once some sheets of paper she had brought back with her. They are covered with Priscilla's name surrounded by cabalistic signs and queer drawings that have a curious confused beauty resembling grotesquely some of Blake's woodcuts with which he used to be fondly familiar.

I see no point in exposing this last naked phase of poor Simon's distress to the public. I will quote the few lines

in his journal that make sense in their proper place at the end of this book. It remains for me to write the last chapter of Priscilla's story. Would that I had never begun the task. Would that it could all be buried in decent oblivion. I am a believer in the great decencies. I take it that our business here on this planet is to conform to them and to make as little fuss about our lot as possible. Yet I find myself affected by Simon's dementia. His questions have dropped like seeds into my old dry mind. They spring up now in the solitude of my lonely cottage evenings. Who am I to answer any one of them?

I have no quarrel with religion so long as it is secret and where outer forms are necessary dumb. Surely its essence is mystery, and if there be a way by which we human beings can establish authentic relations with a spiritual universe that way is silence. The sea, the mountains, the desert, the clouds, whatever they may seem to say to us that is grave, that is humbling, that is suggestive of a mind immense in its compass, gigantic in its conceptions, if they do at moments convey even to the most sceptical the impression of being the creation of a supreme artist, surely the power of their mystic suggestion lies in the fact that they are mute.

Simon's continual talk of God is offensive to me. Yet for what do I blame him? Merely for believing with the utmost seriousness what all orthodox Christians profess to believe, and for sticking literally to the tenets of the Church in the face of every human appeal to the contrary. His jealousy destroyed him 'tis true, but it was his doctrine that destroyed Priscilla. If crime he committed it was for the sake of his belief. The Holy Scriptures and the Prayer-book were to him the authentic and final revelation of the Will of God, as infallibly true as if God, the Supreme Being, had held in His Hand the pen that wrote them down.

Poor Simon. I would speak of him with affection if for no other reason than because he was Edward's son. It

is with a puerile dread of disturbing his father's shade in that eerie land beyond the grave that I allow this book to go to the printers. After all, how can I tell that Edward does not still live? At any rate for his sake I hope that Simon will be understood. It was his effort to attain to beauty that made him impossible. It was peculiarly true of him that his finest qualities were those which rendered him unattractive and in the end unsupportable to himself as well as to others.

I think of him when he and Priscilla lived together, waking at night in a cold sweat with the sounds of the intolerable anguish of a distant multitude in his ears, and of how he would throw himself on his knees and pray, twisting the bed linen in his hurting hands, for the heathen of China, of India, of Africa. I remember how sometimes Priscilla would wake to find him on the floor in a sort of swooning misery, and how she would take him in her arms and warm him, holding him close while his teeth chattered and rattled together. I see them together in that grave sleeping house, two young creatures, alone in the dark that was cold, in the night that seemed to take no account of their strange and pitiful problem.

Priscilla is gone. I am old. Only the old people seem to be left, a group of old people and a little boy who bears Crab's name.

Milly lives alone at Creech with the faithful Minchin. Why faithful? There are always faithful servants sticking to old ruined English families. Minchin grows buxom and portly. She has married one of the gardeners. She wears black silk in the afternoons and tyrannises over her crumpled mistress, and accompanies the bent little figure on Saturdays to Simon's place of confinement. Sometimes I see them driving to the station in Simpkin's fly, Milly shrunken in her little black bonnet and cape, Minchin resplendent, a discreet quill in her hat.

If Priscilla had not come home at the end of two years, if she had not gone to Simon with her fateful news in a

last hope of persuading him to set her free, it may be that he would be well now and contented. He was recovering. He had begun to go about again a little in the village. He would visit his old friend Eliza Penny of an afternoon. The villagers welcomed his reappearance. All their old feeling against him had vanished. Clumsily they tried to make up to him for that past harshness. They were on his side now, of course. If Priscilla, if Crab, if Tupper, if any one of them had not done as they did do, if Tupper had talked to him that night when he rushed over to Jericho Sands in a frenzy——

Simon alludes to this visit. He does not describe it. I must go back to it. I must fill in some of the gaps in Simon's narrative. There is a deal that I could add, had I a mind to. His story, one may say, is all gaps. I could go back to where I left off and tell the whole tale over again from another angle, were my object to champion those lovers. It is not. Priscilla would not be grateful to me for doing it, and Crab does not care a tuppenny bit what the world thinks. He never did. Neither of them did. Their passion was cruel, exclusive. They were both totally unmindful of others, indifferent to the storm of scandal that they raised and left streaming in the wake of their flight, like a dusty whirlwind. That was all very well. For them it didn't matter. They were gone. They were off on the wild wide wings of a proud eagle, soaring through the azure, riding their dream like a couple of gods, but Tupper, left behind on the ground, got it all, the whole suffocating volume, full in the face. They soared, they didn't look back or down, but the dust they kicked up in their leap from the earth was like the harsh yellow swirling fog raised by a motor on a long dry road. Tupper stood in the road looking after them, enveloped in it. I see him like that.

Crab made no attempt to see either of his parents before he left England. He merely wrote Tupper a short, and in my opinion, a monstrously impertinent note from his

club the morning of his departure in which he stated that he was going abroad with Priscilla Birch and that while awaiting the divorce which would make it possible for them to marry he considered her his wife and expected anyone who cared to continue on terms of friendliness with him to extend to her this same title. That was all. He remained, sincerely, Crab. To Violet he did not even vouchsafe a message. Such behaviour is impossible to excuse, and difficult of explanation. One can scarcely put such rudeness down to an excessive sensibility. He knew, of course, that his father and mother would be furious and chose to avoid all possibility of a scene. It is apparent, too, that he wished at the outset to make Priscilla's position and his own seriousness perfectly clear. It is even possible to admire the arrogance with which he laid down the terms on which he would meet people, insisting beforehand on Priscilla's dignity, and conveying a threat to anyone who might question it, before any offence was given. But all the same, taking into full consideration his underlying feeling, which was one of chivalry for the woman he loved, I yet find his manner to his parents disgraceful. He could perfectly well have written civilly. He might easily have asked one or the other to meet him in town. It couldn't conceivably have been funk that made him avoid an interview. Much more likely he simply till the last moment forgot them. Tupper had been for years the most unobtrusive of fathers, Vi the most casually suave and unexacting of mothers. He had never taken them into consideration as having anything to do with his amusements, his extravagances, his escapades. He had always done as he liked and had considered his duty fulfilled when he went down to them once a quarter to bore himself at Jericho Sands, where the hunting was poor, the shooting only moderate, and the place itself a too solemn reminder of his own responsibilities for the future. How then if when he was comparatively heart-free he wasted

so little thought on the dim, shy old man who demanded so little of his time and attention, was it to be expected that suddenly in the midst of the romantic drama, whose curtain was rung up with Priscilla's flight from Creech and arrival at Waterloo Station at seven o'clock on a certain July morning, he should begin to be kind where he had been always something very like a selfish brute.

Love, we are told by some people, makes us charitable and tender. It waters the dry wells of our sympathies. It fills us with good will to all men. That may or may not be so. I myself have never noticed the unselfishness of lovers. They have usually appeared to me, on the contrary, of an idiotic egotism, when I have had the misfortune to be thrown with such happy couples. They have a provoking way of gazing deep with ecstasy into each other's eyes while frowning abstractedly on the rest of us. The description is not intended for these two. I did not see them together at this the time I suppose of their great happiness. Indeed, in spite of Simon's suspicions it is a fact that I only once saw them together during all those months preceding the climax of their drama, and I cannot, of course, dismiss them as a happy couple of lunatics. Would that I could. All that I mean is in this connection, that Crab's tenderness was all for Priscilla, not a drop of it overflowed to anyone else. It was as if she alone had touched his heart and by so doing had transformed him for herself, but only for herself, into a being who no doubt had always existed within the smooth, hard envelope of his person, but had never before she came been seen by man or woman.

She made him timid and gentle and in the early days of his passion rather clumsy in his movements. I remember that day long ago when he strolled into my cottage and found her there, being utterly astounded by his bumping into a table and tripping over a footstool. Nor had this anything to do with the awkwardness of his newly-adjusted leg. He managed that limb very well, and although he

was already beginning to put on weight and gave the impression now rather of a massive giant than a keen flashing blade, still his splendour remained, more impressive indeed than formerly, with an added quality, because of his grey hair and his worn, stern visage which would always bear the marks of the war. He was forty years of age when the war ended, and looked for all his great length and high bearing five years older. His youth was gone. He was become a stubborn and thoughtful man who might, one thought as one looked at him, become what is called a power in the land. He had too, it appeared, ideas, or at any rate purposes, concerning England and the Empire. The war had forced him to reflect. He had made up his mind to put his massive shoulder to the wheel of our lumbering national coach.

Priscilla changed all that. She stepped into view. She appeared, serene and aloof, in his path, like some proud little dryad striding lightly ahead of him in a wooded glade. He followed her. She led him away from the high road, deep into that magical jungle where so many decent lives have perished. Once she had cast her spell on him he was for all worldly purposes lost. He had become, inside his great hard shell, a dreamer, a poet, a helpless child. The world faded from his eyes. The army, the body politic, the fields of the dead whom he had solemnly sworn in his heart to serve somehow, though he didn't quite know how, the towers of Jericho Sands, the tall figures of his father and mother, all faded. He was, I comically note, in the presence of Priscilla as Simon was in the presence of God. Priscilla's spirit was the little white gate that led into that other more beautiful country of the soul. That place became for him the reality just as poor Simon's mystic region was real to him. Crab too, but astoundingly in his case, for no one would have ever suspected him of so much imagination, was in danger of being run over by the wheels of business when he talked and walked with Priscilla. His voice when he addressed her struck me as very peculiar.

It was husky, it had a deep, shy hesitancy, an only half-successfully concealed tenderness, and I noticed what Puss Featherstone must have seen that his eyes, which he never took from her face, were wistful as a dog's.

It is strange how they all, Simon and Milly and on their side Vi and Tupper, suspected me of conniving with the pair who treated me as ruthlessly as all the others and never so much as left me a message of good-bye. Vi would never believe that I had had the news of their flight from Mrs. Pinch, my housekeeper. I was supposed in some mysterious way to have helped Priscilla to escape. Vi in an extravagant outburst of temper met me at Jericho Sands when I went down after the event with the announcement that she was very surprised to see me. She wouldn't have credited me with so much audacity. She suggested presently, pacing up and down the small drawing-room, in a fine glaring rage, that I had got the girl out of the house.

"Do you mean with a rope ladder?" I asked her. She snorted at that.

"Don't try to be funny. You know you've been in with them all along."

"My dear Vi——"

"Do be still. What's the good of denying it? Your affection for the girl has always amounted to idiocy. She made a perfect fool of you, as she has done now of us all, though I for one never liked her in the least. What Crab can have seen in her—I must say one would have thought that Peggy—now, there's a really pretty woman—would have had the decency to hang on to him after all these years. But she's as bad as you are. If you will believe it, she had that girl hiding in her house in London for five days while her wretched husband trailed the streets looking for her. Does one, I ask you, do such things? What on earth does Crab think he will gain by going off like this? Why couldn't he, if he was so infatuated, which, mind you, I don't believe—I'm sure she's a scheming little cat—why couldn't he observe the decencies? He's not a child. What busi-

ness has he behaving like a romantic fool? And now, of course, he'll have to marry her."

I let her go on. I saw that she was beside herself with the smarting hurt of his slight. Had he written to her, had he deigned to give her his confidence, I believe that she would have played up. She was a good sort, was Vi, and made of strong, fine, tough material. Had he taken the trouble to make her understand the seriousness of his love affair she would have stood by him, although then, to be sure, she would have taken a more tragic view of the whole business. As it was she was both angry and mortified but not frightened. It never occurred to her that Simon would refuse to divorce Priscilla. She did not in the least foresee the disastrous consequences to them all of Crab's baulked purpose, of his profound and lasting passion. She regarded the affair as a silly episode that was to bear the inordinately serious consequence of a life bondage. What she disliked about it was its vulgarity. The gossip and newspaper talk made her sick, but not so sick as the suspicion that Crab was more ordinary than she had thought him. Her pride was wounded. She professed to turn on him or from him with scorn. He had behaved like any low, sentimental ass, and they would all have to pay for his behaviour by seeing him married to a woman whose fair name he himself had fouled.

I observed her that evening with pity. I remembered that she must be over sixty, and I saw that in spite of the erectness of her tall figure she was beginning to show her age. The flesh under her chin waxed scraggy. Her hard cheeks were lined vertically. The skin was drawn tight over the high-beaked nose. The whites of her brilliant eyes were turning to yellow. Yes, she was withering, but as a strong tree will wither, remaining upright, dying of blight slowly inch by inch, its bare, roughened branches still beautifully stalwart, and I thought as I looked at her that never in her young brilliance had she been so barbarically handsome. She had hung herself with encrusted jewels

for our lonely dinner of three covers. Bracelets covered her long thin arms. Her velvet gown was cut low, but the loosening, wrinkling flesh of her throat was bound tight with heavy collars and necklaces of wrought gold and curiously set rubies. An ornament of the same kind was fastened in her hair that was arranged in a close, high crown on her haughty head. Did she wear a false front? I suppose so. Anyhow the effect was regal. Her face showed no trace of rouge or powder. The skin was darkening. It looked almost brown, but her teeth flashed white in her beautiful jaw, and her arched foot and fine leg were slim as ever under the long clinging folds of her plum-coloured dress. She was withered and grand and defiant.

But the fact of her being there at all was a confession of the weariness and discouragement that she scorned to show. Never before had she withdrawn to Jericho Sands in July. Always she had seen the season to its end and had entertained for Goodwood at Tupper's place in Sussex. Had she been consistent she would have gone through with that too and would have commanded the world to ignore with her what she chose to allude to in the more intimate circle of her friends as Crab's tiresome foolishness. But she wasn't consistent. She had wearily, haughtily retreated, not fled, but withdrawn in order from the battlefield and had entrenched herself with Tupper in the great forbidding fortress of his home. They were alone there with an army of servants, of gardeners, of keepers, who watched respectfully, sombrely, from their silent, distant posts. The girls and their husbands were nowhere visible; they had not rallied, it appeared, to their mother in the crisis.

"They are so tiresome," she said wearily, "Babs is such a saint. She has chosen to be shocked, and Violet talks of the disgrace to the family—as if we could be disgraced. It is all so stupid and silly." She sneered her contempt for her offspring and suddenly drawing herself up magnificently

said with the air of an eastern queen, "None of them have got any guts."

I couldn't help smiling at the contrast of her looks and her language, but it was all in harmony really. There was no essential incongruity. She, like Tupper, could and did with impunity use on occasions the coarsest words and give them somehow the stamp of rightness.

"All the same, it's hard on Tupper," she said then with a sigh. "He is taking it badly. Have you noticed?"

I nodded. I knew what she meant only too well.

"I wish he'd be angry as I am," she added presently, "I wish he'd burst out in curses. He simply doesn't speak. I've scarcely heard his voice since I've been here, and that is nearly a week, and when I do make him answer a question he whispers as if he had laryngitis. Do for pity's sake make him talk to you. I can't. Go and clear yourself with him since you deny any share in this freak. He won't let me mention Crab's name to him. You'd better go to him now. He's in his study. He sits there half the night. I don't know when he gets to bed. I hear him sometimes at four in the morning, pacing up and down in his dressing-room. The days aren't so bad. He has enough bothers, God knows, to occupy him. He's had to spend hours with Crab's political supporters. The whole constituency is in a mess. There are meetings all over the place to decide what line to take about the scandal of their member's elopement. Tupper goes from village to village keeping them quiet. I'm sure I don't know though what's to be done. I suppose Crab will have to be communicated with somehow. He'll have to get out, apply for the Chiltern Hundreds. That's what they want, all the smug lot of them really, to get rid of him, but they are afraid at the same time of losing the seat to Labour if they do. That man Powell has made a political fortune out of this. Every Nonconformist is up in arms. I'm told that a disgusting Wesleyan parson named Beckitt actually preached about Crab from his beastly pulpit. It's all too loathsome for

Tupper. And the miners are very troublesome. They vow they'll have nationalisation within two years and do Tupper out of his mining royalties. Letters come by every post. It isn't, you know, a joke. Suppose they should get in next time with a majority. A Labour Government is capable of confiscating the mines. Then where will we be? Left with a few miserable thousands a year and half a dozen houses on our hands, and a mass of land that doesn't bring in a penny. As it is, with the taxes we have to pay now it looks uncommonly as if we should have to sell some of it, which, as you know, he hates doing. It is really too bad of Crab to put Tupper in such a fix. But of course he'll fight—Tupper I mean. He's fighting now. He's gone on the board, you know, that the Government has set up between the owners and miners' leaders, and he'll die rather than give way an inch to the brutes."

"Go, take him on. Make him angry if necessary."

She waved me away to him imperiously.

I found him sitting at his desk at the end of the great, long, gloomy room that was called his study, but that had nothing cosy or intimate about it. How could it have? It was five times too large. It had four immense plate glass windows. The ceiling was high, the chimney piece in proportion, and of a hideous yellow oak heavily carved, as were the doors and the window-frames. Two immense Chesterfields covered in green leather, half a dozen arm-chairs of the same, a roll-top desk, a huge table with many drawers, a revolving bookcase, such was the furniture. Tupper totally lacked the faculty of making a room, any room, his own. He did not settle down into it or assemble objects round him that were comfortable to the touch. He didn't understand or notice objects, or ever get acquainted with them. Wherever he was put, there he stayed, passively accepting the arrangements his wife or his decorator or his housekeeper made for him, unaware of his surroundings, never thinking of moving a chair except to drag it nearer the light, never asking for this or that even if he was

bothered by its absence. If there was no ash tray handy he would look vaguely round, then walk patiently over to the fireplace and knock his pipe ashes into the embers. If there was no room on his table he pushed his papers mildly, a little pettishly, on to the floor. If he needed a new blotter he went without one for days, forgetting when he saw someone to ask for it. So accustomed to the perfect service of discreet and competent underlings as to be all unaware of the tyranny they exercised over him, he put on the clothes they laid out for him, ate the food they served up to him at table, sat on the chairs they carefully dusted and as carefully placed in a stiff, inhuman pattern about the great bleak room, and never expressed any wish of his own or made any comment on the inadequacy of their ideas as to what was proper. For all his great bulk he rested lightly on life, left no imprint as it were on his surroundings. There were times when I saw him as a hermit, living austere in a rare bleak solitude, there in the wide confines of his home, times when he seemed to have no part in it, to be a vague, uninterested stranger, to be passing his existence in a kind of mournful ascetic dream, but of course he did at the same time very undeniably fit his frame. He was an essential part of his edifice. His high, grey, gloomy form fitted the great doors, the tall windows, the stiff-surfaced chairs. And he came to look as he grew old extraordinarily like the place. His redness faded. His face grew grey and blank like its walls. The calm façade of that great mansion resembled his own high serenity of indifference. One received the same impression of immense, blank, gentle disdain.

But now he was suffering, a wounded walrus, bleeding going on somewhere, huge, motionless, heavy.

The room was scarcely lighted at all. He had turned on only the one green-shaded lamp on his table. It shone on his curiously shaped head with its scant covering of hair that was almost white now, lit up the massive objects on the table and a map of the estate on the wall behind him.

Through the big windows that were open, it being very hot that night, the soft darkness seemed to come into the room.

He sat with a gardening book in front of him, but he wasn't reading, he was staring into the long shadowed space that stretched before him, his head hanging forward a little and his long hands dangling limp over the arms of his chair.

He frowned ever so slightly as I entered, then as I approached across the ugly expanse of carpet bent lower over his book. I took up my stand beneath the grotesque chimney-piece. The clock above me ticked on, mechanically marking our silence.

"Most disappointin'," he muttered presently, "can't think what they've been up to." He paused, stroked the long drooping plume of his moustache. "These new Chinese lilies, not worth lookin' at. Last year——" He didn't finish his sentence. His eyes seemed to close. He drooped. I thought he was falling asleep. "Not a single blossom to show. They can't have cleared out that subsoil——" He spoke in a half whisper, very slowly.

"So you think I let you down, Tupper?"

He made a grimace without looking up. His upper lip receded from his teeth. His eyebrows twitched.

"Come, out with it. You think I encouraged Crab in this madness? You believe he came to me for help?"

For a long time he didn't answer. I thought he never would, then I heard him mumble mildly two surprising words.

"Natural enough."

"Well," I bellowed, my voice sounding like a roar to my ears in comparison with his toneless mutter. "They didn't so much as warn me or send me any farewell message, or give me a chance to try and stop them."

He seemed to sigh then, I thought I heard his sigh travelling in the still air.

"Wouldn't blame you," he said then, and leaned back in his great chair and looked at me.

A moment we stared at each other, two old men with a life-companionship behind them. It makes me feel shy to describe my emotion at that moment. I, too, have my fear of seeming ridiculous. One can't quite decently talk of one's own old rigid sentiments. All the same a recognition was there between us, an avowal of something, only force of habit perhaps, and mutual respect and tolerance, nothing more than a tribute, you may say, to the long dull days we had passed together, lit by only a dim, dim flicker of our vanished youth, still there it was. It was deep and final. I saw in his reddened old anguished eyes an appeal, an admission, a renewal of trust, and I gave a kind of gulp as if my old vitals were strangely disturbed, and heard myself clearing my throat.

I knew then as we stared at each other that he didn't at all share Violet's view of Crab's behaviour. He could not dismiss it as silly or vulgar. He knew Crab too well for that, far better than Vi did, and he was much more deeply hurt, and there was a deal more to it for him than an occasion for anger. He had gauged already the depth and obstinacy of his son's passion, and he had come to a very accurate estimate of Priscilla's power. He had liked Priscilla. He had been taken with her and the quality in the girl that had charmed him remained with him now as a promise of catastrophe. Peggy Sidlington had been wrong about him. He foresaw the whole slow, long-drawn-out tragedy. The only thing that could save the lot of them would be a divorce, for he knew that Crab would never give up Priscilla now.

His next words showed me how his mind was amazingly, lucidly working.

"It's devilishly awkward, the husband being a parson."

"It is."

"He won't divorce her."

"I don't know."

"I do."

I had never known him so articulate. There was a desperation, clearness, and precision in his bitter whispered statements. He knew that they were lost, those two. He knew that his house was doomed. The long solemn line of his forebears stretched back, now how could it stretch forward? This was the end of it. What was to become of Jericho Sands and all that it represented? It would go to some distant relation.

I observed him with increasing amazement. How was it that he understood so much, had penetrated so quickly to the very heart of the difficulty? Was it that he remembered his own youth and realised that had he found himself in a like position he would have done as Crab had done? Did he understand Crab and Priscilla because he himself was a great lover, or at any rate had wanted to be? Had he hidden away all these years behind his grey, shy, forbidding dumbness a romantic heart that dreamed and adored in secret? I believed that it was so.

Oh, amazing and ironic comedy that is life! No one knew, no one would ever know. I alone had a glimmering of what he had been thinking all these forty years that he had spent by the side of the one woman he had ever cared for, timidly and drearily withdrawing into the background, letting her do as she liked, never complaining, never insisting, leaving her free to shine, to glitter, to dazzle the world that filled him with a panic of shyness, of disgust.

Vi and Tupper—Tupper a romantic lover, now getting on for seventy, but remembering, regretting, wishing that he had been other than he was, seeing himself as a failure, as a deadly bore, as nothing more to Vi than a sombre and depressing background, as nothing more to his son than a dreary reminder of the tyranny of a system.

"Read that," he said, when we had been musing both of us in silence for some minutes. It was then that he gave me Crab's note which I have quoted, and it was while I was reading it that the door far away at the end of the room

opened suddenly and silently and a wild, haggard, ghostly face was thrust through it.

It was Simon.

He had been prowling round the house I learned afterwards and had seen Tupper through the open windows and had found his way in through a small door that opened into the passage outside the study.

He came forward with an idiotic, sickly smile jerking on his sunken face and said with a painful effort at normality that struck me as the very last pathetic hypocrisy of madness :

" I hope, sir, that I do not disturb you ? I have come to ask you what you intend to do ? "

Tupper did not move. He made no sound. His jaw had dropped. He wore his walrus look of idiotic stupidity.

Simon continued to smile with twisting lips, fixing this apparition all the while with his haunted sunken eyes.

" Your son has stolen my wife. I wish to know what steps you are taking in the matter ! "

Tupper continued to stare. Simon came nearer. He approached within a couple of feet of the table. The lamp-light showed his emaciated face to be greasy with sweat. He seemed to be shivering and to be making a great effort to hold himself rigid, but his shoulders, his head, his legs, kept twitching as if with St. Vitus' dance. I saw that his self-control might go at any moment. I stepped forward.

" Good evening, Simon. "

He threw me a swift, frightened glance over his shoulder, lifted it quickly, as a man does to avoid a blow on the side of the head, and began to talk very rapidly, standing in this twisted attitude, his head sharply bent to one side, but keeping his burning eyes on Tupper's expressionless countenance.

" You are proud, you do not speak, but I have a message for you," he said, " from God. Your days are numbered. You will be brought low. You and all your house. Nothing can save you but instant repentance. As it was in the days

of Sodom and Gomorrah so it will be with you. You shall be destroyed, you and all your kin, your sons and your daughters, and your servants, every man and woman within your gates, for you have turned from God in your pride and have become an eyesore to the Lord. Too long now, too long, The patience of the Almighty is exhausted. The walls of your house are already crumbling. Soon, soon, they will fall and you and yours will be consumed. Give me back my wife whom you have stolen before the judgement of God falls on you, before it is too late, lest she be lost too, lest she be lost. Give her back. Give her back." His voice rose in a kind of screaming sob.

Tupper's astonishment had given way to a different expression. His face had gone purple, his eyes red. He appeared to be swallowing vigorously, yet when Simon's shrill voice broke on that scream he still made no sound, no movement. The silence lasted some seconds, how many? I don't know. I saw Simon, his arm outstretched at Tupper's convulsed face, suspended, in his twisted attitude, like a grotesque wooden thing worked by a string, and again I interrupted, wondering as I did so why Tupper did not get up and take him by the collar. I myself advanced and took Simon by the arm. There was the beginning then of a sort of struggle and scuffle.

"Let me be, let me alone. Hands off there. I have to do with him, not with you. He can get them back if he wants to. He has means. He can bring pressure, I can't. I have hunted for them all over London. They hid there. London's too big. It was I that was lost. I was looking for my wife, my wife, do you hear? His son has stolen my wife Priscilla. He knows where they are. He alone can get them back. I am helpless."

Tupper waved me off. I stood back. He seemed about to speak. He leaned forward a little in his chair. I saw an idea forming in his mind, a purpose. I was aware of a sudden impulse in him.

Simon was still now. He had shrunk together, was

huddled, his hands interlocked and twisting. His sunken face wore a look of terrible expectancy. His eyes implored. He too waited for Tupper to speak, and as he waited he seemed to come to himself, to become painfully aware of the great room, the massive furniture, the cold dignity. He seemed to be remembering, to be responding, to be influenced by something strong and obstinate that existed there. It was as if he were reminded of things he had long forgotten, recalled to instincts and habits in himself that were obscurely in sympathy with that place, and that man. I saw him hesitate, look round in a bewildered sort of way, pass his damp hand across his damper forehead. An expression of confusion and of embarrassment came into his face that flushed crimson, and at last he spoke again falteringly :

“ I—I am sorry if I have appeared discourteous. I beg pardon for intruding. It is the pain. I do not always realise. I was obliged to come. It was necessary. I have no wish to—I mean I would not appear to—I beg you to understand. You can relieve—you can be of assistance. The circumstances are so terrible, so painful. Pray advise me, I am distracted, broken—the pain in my head. If you would be kind enough to tell me what to do, where to find——”

He broke off. Again he waited. I believe that if Tupper had talked to him then that he might have agreed to divorce Priscilla. It was the moment.

But Tupper never spoke, never uttered one single word. As I watched I saw his purpose fade. It was almost like the dismissal of a last means of escape. Whatever it was that he was going to say, he dismissed it, rejected it, turned back into his silence with disdain. He closed his eyes, a sneer appeared on his face. He blinked once, surveyed Simon's pitiful figure with one last supreme look of disgust and calmly as if he were quite alone moved his gardening book nearer and turning a page began to read.

I can scarcely tell how I got Simon away. He burst out

again wildly. It was all a painful and disgraceful confusion of reproaches and feeble curses and weak shakings of the fist. I propelled him to the door.

"God will avenge me," he cried. "His vengeance, His vengeance." I pushed him through the door along the passage, got him outside, on to the terrace. I found he had come on his bicycle. I said I would send him back in one of the motors. He was so weak, so shaken, that I was frightened. But he refused all offers of assistance.

"Let me be," he said at last wearily. "Leave me in peace. Do you think I'll go back in there?" He seemed to have come to his senses again. "It was folly to come," he said. "I know that." He gave a long sick shudder, leaned a moment against the stone balustrade of the terrace. "Such pain—one is not responsible—I hoped—I had a last hope."

We found his bicycle by the south steps. He was hatless. He didn't think he had worn a hat. It took him an age to light his lamps. I tried to help him. He pushed me off feebly, repeating, "Let me be. Let me be."

I watched him at last wheel away into the darkness. He had fifteen miles to go. What should I do? Send a car after him? Why draw attention to his maniacal misery?

I went back into the house, but at the open door of the study I paused. Vi was there, standing beside Tupper, who still sat where I had left him, her hand on his shoulder.

"What is it, Tupper?" I heard her say. She saw me then and addressed me from her distance.

"What has happened?"

"Simon Birch has been here."

"Oh."

Tupper looked up then. "Nearly told him what I thought of him," he said. "Nearly asked him to do it. Thought of putting it to him—about the divorce, you know, being the only way. Could have squashed him, I s'pose." He ruminated a moment. "Humph." Another pause. "Couldn't—couldn't bring myself——" He looked up at

Vi with a question. She nodded. I imagined as I turned away that he leaned his head then against her.

The immense house was silent as a tomb as I wandered through the labyrinth of its empty rooms.

We live imprisoned.

CHAPTER II

It is useless to put off the end. I must tell how Priscilla came home to have her baby and die. My hand trembles. God keep me from maudlin sentiment. Let me put down the bare facts. Let me not huddle her brave, deliberate death in the clumsy and stuffy trappings of my mourning.

She was no sentimentalist. Her downright spirit will not allow me to call her tragic. She had two years of happiness with Crab her lover, she had her baby, she had all her heart's desire.

"Such a duck of a baby, Bill," I seem to hear her say. Did she say that once? I forget.

Giving him birth cost her her life. She knew that it would. She cannot have deluded herself, although she pretended so well that she almost persuaded us to believe it would not be so. Still, I know that she knew. I know that she looked ahead and saw the rim, the great knife edge and walked straight up to it with her eyes open and stepped across. Valiant Priscilla, sturdy and clear-eyed, chuckling a little to put heart into us, making little jokes sometimes, holding herself straight, walking deliberately forward with her light, nervous, vigorous step, taking Crab with her to the end of the short road, deceiving him to the very last moment, protecting him from the knowledge of what was approaching so swiftly.

Not many people remember her. Few people knew her. She made no great stir in the world, save for a week or two at the time of her elopement. That set London and the county agog. She was the absorbing topic of gossip for a little while. In the drowsy houses of our countryside she was discussed, condemned and consigned to her fate, discussed with unction, condemned with pleasure, and con-

signed to her fate with an obscure faint envy. Virtue and propriety appeared for a moment as dull and humdrum in the lurid glow of her drama. A certain glamour clung to her name, lingered in the minds of men and women who had known her as a girl out hunting with her father, flowed like the emotion of a dream through their lethargic hearts, stirred them faintly, made them restless for a moment, then faded. But in the wider world she was known only as the woman who ran away with Lord Willing.

She and Crab stayed away two years. Then one day I received a brief note from her announcing her arrival in England. "Crab and I are back. We have taken a house on Ham Common. We are coming to see you next Thursday afternoon." That was all.

I had five days in which to wonder and worry about the cause of their sudden return. Wonderful as it was to me to know that I would see Priscilla again, I was nevertheless very disturbed by the news. Indeed I worked myself into a fine state of fuss. It might be that they had come only for a short visit, but then why take a house? Crab might have been obliged for some reason to go into certain questions with his father. On the other hand I knew that Tupper had settled upon him a very substantial sum of money and had enabled him to buy the ranch in New Mexico. There could be no difficulty about funds. Was it merely that they so longed for England that they could not keep away? If that was it then they were indeed to be pitied. I could not imagine for them any happiness at home, where they would be forced to live furtively, to keep up a *louche* kind of incognito. I foresaw a hundred disagreeable complications. I feared for Priscilla. Crab could not remain hidden. He would be seen, sought out, dragged back by interfering friends into the world where he still was and always would be an important figure. People would refrain from awkward questions. Well-meaning friends would be glad to have a chance of separating him gradually from the woman who depended on him. I knew

of other couples in a similar position. I had seen such a *ménage* more than once go gradually to pieces. Such a man as Crab could not keep away from his clubs. He would have to resist a thousand lures and quash a hundred instincts. He would have to give up day after day and every day the amusements that invited for the sake of that lonely creature whose existence society tactfully ignored.

Could Crab stand this? If so for how long? Would Priscilla put up with it? Would her pride not compel her to urge him to leave her to dine out, to mix with his friends? Some of her own would stand by her undoubtedly. Puss Featherstone and Peggy Sidlington of course; they might form round her a small group, defiant, reckless, gay, but their gaiety would all the while savour of the *coulisse*. Priscilla would remain for all their efforts an outcast. And why Ham Common, so near London, with the world that took no account of them streaming by their obscure little gate? Were they bored already with each other's society? Were they looking for distraction?

I knew at once on the instant of welcoming them that no such petty impulse had brought them home. Priscilla was beautiful that day, beautiful as I had never seen her. She was dramatically changed. I remember my view of her as she stepped down from the long grey limousine at my gate, her hand resting lightly on Crab's, who stood in the road to help her alight. Queenly she was and proud and serene. I felt suddenly shy. Her clothes were smarter than any I had ever seen her wear. If she had been in the wilderness she showed no signs of it. Her eyes were dark under a small violet hat. She wore a luxurious coat of some dark soft fur whose great collar framed her pale cheeks. Her hand was gloved, her arched foot elegantly shod, but it was not only her clothes that changed her and that, expressing Crab's fastidious taste rather than her own, annoyed me a little, but that now, knowing the secret she was hiding then in her breast, seem to me an interesting indication of the high, careful line she was taking; it was not

all this subdued grandeur of enveloping sable that made her look to my eyes like some romantic princess in a story, it was the poetry that I saw in her face as she came forward and the light in her eyes. Her smile was radiantly gentle. It moulded her cheeks delicately to new winsome contours. A deep lasting delight had been at work on her countenance. But when I had her seated in my study and looked closer, I saw that her face was worn, and that something had gone out of her, some of her buoyant strength perhaps. Her youth was still there, but she seemed at the same time to be consumed. For an instant she leaned back as if very tired, but almost immediately roused herself. "I am going to see Simon," she said. "I will leave Crab with you and come back."

I showed my consternation. "Must you, Priscilla?"

"Yes. I must. I have something important to say to him."

"Can't you write it?"

"No."

I demurred. I looked at Crab. He was staring sombrely at my carpet.

"Do you approve of this, Crab?"

"No, I don't, but she is determined, so—well—she must do as she likes. I have agreed." It was clear to me that he hated her going. He had flushed a deep red as he spoke. She rose then and went to him, laying a hand on his arm.

"You know that it is worth trying, Crab."

"Yes."

"You promised not to mind."

He grunted.

"I won't be long," she said, "half an hour at most."

She dropped her cloak from her and stated her intention of walking. She did not want to drive up to the door in the car. She would take the path along the river and go up through the fields and garden. We watched her go. Her step was firm, her carriage high. She swung off through the windy autumn afternoon with her old long

vigorous stride. In her smart tweed suit she looked more as she had used to do. I observed that though her shoes were elegant they were also sensible.

We went back silently to my study and silently lighted our pipes. A branch, I remember, was swishing against the window. Stray leaves fluttered down outside. The wind was rising. The fire fluttered. Crab stood looking out, his hands in his pockets, his broad shoulders looming darkly in the low shadowy room.

"Damned blighter," he burst out at last with his back to me. "He'll not do it even now."

"Do what?"

"Set her free. Do the decent thing. Get his divorce. It's for that."

"She has gone to ask him?"

"Yes."

"And she thinks——?"

"Yes. She is sure she says that when she tells him he'll give in."

"Tells him what?"

"That she's going to have a baby. It will be impossible for him to refuse, she says. I dunno. I can't make him out, never could. Anyhow if he doesn't now it will be pretty awful. I've been to my solicitors. They say a divorce could be got through in the time on the grounds of adultery, before, I mean, the baby's born. We've got six months. We could perhaps get everything done, I mean get married before, the child then would be legally mine. That's the thing we can't bear, you see, that it shouldn't be. I'm afraid we've got into rather a mess. It was a mistake. I didn't intend—Priscilla wanted one awfully, I believe, all the time—but of course one couldn't do that to anybody, to any little helpless chap, deliberately, but now that it has happened she's awfully glad, we both are, only we've got to somehow fix things. I say, what's the matter?"

He had wheeled round and now stared at me. He had

not heard my groan a few seconds before. He had gone on talking while my heart went sick in my side. Now at the sight of his great stupid face I burst out at him, "Matter? The matter is that you've killed her." There was a moment's silence in the room.

"What do you mean?" he asked at last, dragging out his words queerly.

"Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Didn't she tell you?"

"Tell me what? No, nothing, she told me nothing."

"What happened ten years ago. Didn't anyone tell you? Didn't you hear?"

"I knew that she'd had a baby that died."

"Didn't she tell you what the doctors said at the time?"

"No, no, she never mentioned them. What did they say? For God's sake be quick, man."

"They said it would be fatal for her ever to have another child—that she would die."

I let him have it full in the face. The sight of his magnificent brute strength infuriated me. I watched him crumple up then. I saw him go down into a chair holding on to the table, his wooden leg sticking out stiff, and bury his head on his arms. He took it quietly like a dumb animal, then I heard him making sounds, ugly little animal-like noises. Presently I distinguished the whisper of Priscilla's name. "Priscilla, Priscilla," he repeated softly over and over again as if saying his prayers. For a while I let him go on. The sight of him then disgusted me. I told him curtly that whatever he felt he must get himself in hand before she came back, he must on no account let her suspect that there was anything the matter.

"You mean it would make her ill?" he asked idiotically.

"Good God, man. I don't know. I'm no doctor. I only mean that as she hasn't told you the least you can do is to play up to her."

"She saw a doctor in London. She went without me. She said everything was all right."

"Well, she lied. Do you do the same?"

He groaned again and began talking of specialists, of consulting the best man in England.

"Of course, of course. You'd better go to Sir Barclay."

"He's the one she had before?"

"Yes."

"Then he's sure to say—isn't he?"

"Do you want him to lie to you?"

"No, no; oh, my God!"

He did, however, pull himself together when she came back and met her with a very decent composure, going to her quietly and taking her hand and looking down into her face with a queer, timid tenderness of adoration as if he were looking at some heart-breaking miracle. If she saw in his gaze an anguished question she thought it was his fear of the outcome of her visit that inspired it, and she announced quickly:

"It's no good. He won't."

Her face was haggard. It had gone the bluish pallor that I had noted sometimes, and was so drawn as to appear somehow distorted. Crab led her to a chair. She leaned back and closed her eyes and shivered. He knelt down, chafed her hands, took off her shoes, rubbed her feet very gently, pushed her chair nearer to the fire, while I poured out a scalding cup of tea.

"Drink this, sweetheart," he said, holding the steaming cup. She opened her eyes then and drank obediently. He stood looking down at her, his eyes bloodshot, veiled, dumb, like a dog's.

"He was sitting in the library with a rug over his knees, awfully changed, so thin and grey, but he jumped up when I came in. He thought I had come back to stay." She spoke very wearily. "He was so glad to see me, it was dreadful, so pathetic. Then when I told him—he went mad." She shuddered. "I had to tell him several times,

He couldn't seem to understand. At last when he took it in, well, the idea of my having a baby seemed to send him out of his mind."

"What did he do?" Crab spoke very quietly. "Did he touch you, hurt you?" He spoke with difficulty. The words stuck in his throat, grated softly, came out clumsily like little lumps of coagulated sound.

"Oh, no. It was the Hamlet sort of thing—get thee to a nunnery. He ran away from me across the room. Unclean, he seemed to think I was unclean." She stared a moment with horror back at the scene that had just played itself out, then lifted her head and smiled. "So it was no use after all. I'm sorry, Crab. Anyhow it's over. We've done what we could." Her voice was brusque, rather rough.

I left them alone then. I went out into the windy, sodden garden and stared at the ugly sky.

When they called me back half an hour later Priscilla's face was stern.

"What silly stuff have you been telling Crab?" she asked abruptly.

I looked from one to the other. Crab nodded.

"She guessed," he said.

"You've given him the most awful scare, Tweedle, and all for nothing. Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? What business is it of yours to interfere?" She was very angry.

"My dear, my dear," I murmured.

"I suppose you meant to be kind, but it was very stupid and clumsy of you, and you were wrong. You are, do you hear me, Tweedle, entirely mistaken, and those old idiots who looked after me before didn't know what they were talking about and what happened then will not happen again, that I know. I am different now, entirely different, a different person. Call it a miracle if you like, Crab's miracle, anyhow it is as I say, you can take it from me; and now, Tweedle, please take back every word you said and

apologise, dear, for your gross impertinence," and she smiled as I muttered something about being sorry. I must have looked very miserable.

"Poor old Tweedle," she added and kissed me happily, "Good-bye. You are a duffer." She even chuckled then. Her face was serene as they drove away. I saw her turn it to Crab, her eyes shining, her lips sweetly and comically curved. She was lying to him. She was convincing him that I was a fool. But that little chuckle had betrayed her. There was really nothing to laugh about.

She kept it up. During the six months that they lived in that bright, little, ghastly house on Ham Common she never let on, never showed a flicker of fear. Coolly, obstinately, she lied, so cool, so calm, so apparently sure of herself that there were moments when she spoofed us all.

It was a pleasant enough house, a Queen Anne affair in red brick with quite a nice garden, the interior all white paint and gay flowered chintz and shiny mahogany and polished brass.

I used to go over sometimes. Once or twice they put me up for the night out of kindness. They did not really want me or anyone much. They preferred to be alone, and although they lived very well and sensibly, their house perfectly run by admirable servants, with Scrub the First and Scrub the Second, who had followed them to the ranch in New Mexico and back, now in charge like a couple of decent fiery-headed twins in livery; though they showed when I was there little sign of strain and made none of the usual gestures that betray an absorbing and exclusive passion, addressing each other in quiet, commonplace terms; refraining from words of affection or foolish talk and never caressing each other or fondling or anything of that sort while I was with them, still there was something terrible and deep and grim about them, something that surged like a river under their calm, something tumultuous and desperate and wild, that they controlled, but that made its existence felt in spite of them, permeating that new,

immaculate house, filling it with an atmosphere that was strange, as if some giant spirit had brought back from Arizona and New Mexico a quantity of electric air from the hot desert and wide, primitive forests of spicy pines and cold, dreaming, ice-covered mountains and had poured it into that little English villa.

They took long walks every morning. They motored sometimes into the country. Crab played golf nearly every afternoon, solemnly dragging his wooden leg round the course. Peggy and Puss Featherstone came down, and some of Crab's friends. There were evenings of bridge. Priscilla played a very good game. There was a gramophone that whirled out the latest tunes. Priscilla would say "Let's dance," and turn back the drawing-room carpet. She carried her baby well, as some long-limbed English women do, showing little trace of change in the contours of her fine frame. It was her face that changed most. It was thin and bloodless, the white skin drawn tight over the fine square bones, making her jaw more obstinate, her eyes more dark and sunken. The little blue smudges under them were deep now, almost mauve, her lips were somehow stiff. When she chuckled or threw back her head and laughed one was startled.

We all played up. Peggy was casual, sweet and gay. Her touch was light on the drama of that fated pair. It was a consummately tempered caress, a blessing unuttered, conveyed subtly through the artistry of her good breeding. A spoiled beauty she might be, an abandoned woman in Simon's sense no doubt she was, very restless she was supposed to be since the war, changing lovers with petulant rapidity, indulging quite vulgar caprices, taking up strange men not of her own world, then dropping them coldly, avid for new sensations and interests, all the same she found time to stand by Crab and Priscilla. She drifted in and out of their house, came down on rainy afternoons with her knitting and chatted away or mused from behind billowy masses of snowy wool. One had a feeling that she

was watching over Priscilla, watching closely. I caught her scrutinising the child more than once intently, when she was unaware. It was she who said to me suddenly one day in February :

“ Well, she’s got through this much, I don’t know how, but she’s done it. They were certain the same poisoning would set in, you know—auto-intoxication—some women are like that, Priscilla’s one of them. But she’s pulled it off, I believe, by will. She’s practising suggestion. She’s fighting all the time. Can’t you see? Well, she’s won so far, and if she’s done this perhaps—who knows? Doctors don’t know everything.”

Crab had I knew seen a dozen and had finally settled on two who came down once a week or so to see Priscilla, important, pompous professionals. They were watching too. Priscilla put up with them. She didn’t fuss or ask to be let alone. She let them do what they liked with her, and did on her side what they prescribed for her. Because of Crab she was docile, but all the time she was laughing at them and carrying on alone, fighting, as Peggy had said, for her baby, determined that Crab’s child should not be lost.

And Puss too was watching, but Puss wasn’t as clever as Peggy. She cared more, I suppose. There was something forced in her cheerfulness, a harsh ring to her laughter. She would stay away for a week or two, then come desperately back. After all it was she who had been there that other time and had saved Priscilla’s life and had sat with me in the garden, waiting.

One day as we drove away together she burst out, “ How can she send Crab off to golf every day when there’s so little time? Three hours every day he’s away from her, and every one of them’s counted. She has counted them. Just so many hours left, and we take up dozens; we ought to leave them alone.”

Her words showed me Priscilla suddenly, like a character in some awful story by Edgar Allen Poe, standing on a

platform that was shrinking, that was pivoted over an abyss. The world for her was small as a table now. She stood solid in the centre of it, and watched it shrinking, watched the edges drawing closer and closer to her feet.

I too stayed away for a month or more after this conversation. When I went back I found a great cluster of lilies on her table.

"Moone has been here," she told me. "He was so pathetic, poor darling, so awfully shy. He couldn't say anything, but I knew what he wanted to say. We talked about flowers mostly. He's doing very well with his orchids this year. He finally blurted out an invitation just as he was leaving, asking me to come down to Jericho Sands. Wasn't it sweet of him?" She laughed, then said, "Lady Moone sent this with a note," she pointed to a box in which lay a piece of very old and beautiful lace. "For the christening," said Priscilla. "It was Crab's." Her eyes were wet.

She began to talk then as she never had talked to me. It was April. It was raining. There was a freshness of spring in the air. Along the garden paths crocuses showed. Priscilla lay on a chaise longue by the window. Her face was very pale. She seemed very tired.

"Mummy has never come," she said. "It's funny what religion makes people do—isn't it, Bill? She's staying away for Christ's sake—and it is breaking her heart." She paused, moved her languid head toward the window, spoke again gravely:

"I married Simon to be safe, because he was good, and he was good, Bill, and I was awfully fond of him, but it was all a mistake. It was because of Daddy's dying. I was frightened. One should never do anything when one is frightened, only when one is glad. When one is frightened one should just stick it and wait. If I had waited I could have married Crab, and his son would not have suffered.

"I'm not afraid for my son, Crab will look after him. I'm not even afraid of his hating me or blaming me. Crab

will see to that. All the same, it's doing him in, in a way. I know that. It will be awfully difficult for him. I thought of writing a letter to him, but of course I won't, a letter from his mother to be read when he's a man, what bosh! I've thought, too, at times that perhaps there might be some way of watching over him, afterwards, when I'm dead, you know, but that, I know, is all nonsense too, just my own longing, a kind of dream. I know there's nothing—nothing beyond. We disappear—there's no way—I must just leave him to Crab.

"He'll be all right with Crab. I know what he'll be. I can see him quite clearly. He'll be a sturdy little chap," she smiled. "Rather a little brute, you know, but awfully straight and kind really—no nonsense about him—just a decent, awfully decent little English boy—loyal." She closed her eyes. "I'm proud of him," she murmured.

Crab came in. He had been playing golf in the rain. He stood an instant in the doorway looking at us heavily. His face was red and wet, his collar turned up, his trousers were damp and stained with rain, a smell of wet Harris tweed and tobacco and moist earth steamed off him.

Priscilla had lifted her head quickly at the sound of his step. A faint colour had come to her pale cheeks. She leaned forward, now her eyes shining, holding out both her hands. "Crab," she cried, as if she hadn't seen him for an age. He crossed swiftly after his pause of an instant, during which he had cursed me no doubt for being there, and took her hands in both of his. He looked down. She looked up. They seemed to be drinking from each other some deep, invigorating draught.

"Not tired?"

"Not a bit. Had a good game?"

"So-so. Didn't finish the round."

"Why?"

"I wanted to get back."

"Crab!"

"I was fussed."

"Crab, dear," she laughed at him.

"I know, but I was. Besides I've been out two hours."

"Well, you see?" She held her face up for inspection. It was suffused with a delicate rosy flush, that was the lovely colour of her love for him.

He seemed reassured. He sat down. He turned a kind eye on me, then fell to contemplating her again with a hungry gentleness, with a veiled urgency, with a soft, profound heaviness. His gaze was somehow palpable. One felt it travelling the space between them. All his massive being seemed to be watching her in a breathless stilled mingling of mute hope and exquisite muffled fear. Behind his weary face, in his great chest, down in the cavern of his body, little frail terrors were clutching at him and whispering. What did they not convey to him of reproach, remorse, despair as he looked at Priscilla, whose face stoutly and stubbornly gave the lie to it all.

I suppose I should mark up to his credit the true love he bore her. It is interesting no doubt to note that such a man's heart can break, as the saying goes, for a woman, that his life and nature can be transformed by her. Certainly Crab never let Priscilla down in any of the little ways that I feared, but then there was no time. It would have been monstrous had he given any sign of being bored by the equivocal situation during the six months they lived together at Ham. I find his intense absorption and his tenderness only natural. Pathetic he was, I suppose, following her about like a dog from room to room of their little house, waiting at doors for her, watching her come in, go out, walk upstairs, waiting, watching, humbly, timidly, wistfully, leaving her only when she drove him from her presence, hurrying back, concealing clumsily his heavy panic, leaping to do her bidding, to fetch and carry her little things. I marked the change. I remembered him in his young, arrogant days. I don't deny that he suffered, that everything had slipped from him save his love for Priscilla. I know that she alone mattered to him,

and that he will never forget her. All the same he still lives, and he will, I suppose, one day marry someone. Puss perhaps. Why not? She would look after the boy, and she loved Priscilla. They might make a match of it in memory of Priscilla. There would be an ironic fitness in such an arrangement.

When I left them that day he came with me to the door, and as I got into my coat asked stupidly, "How do you find her? Don't you think she looks well? Even Sir James says now he believes it's all right. She's sure, you know, absolutely certain. She couldn't be so cheerful could she? Wouldn't she know?"

I too lied then, not that it made any difference to him.

I did not go to see Priscilla again. I kept away.

That was long ago. Priscilla's son is three years old now—a sturdy little chap, as she said he would be. He lives at Jericho Sands. Tupper walks him solemnly round the greenhouses. Round they go hand in hand, for Tupper played up and so did Vi. Crab took the boy there when he was a week old. There was no one to dispute with Crab his possession. Agatha, although she came to Priscilla at last, seemed afraid of the child, never thought of assuming the responsibility of his upbringing and let him go, helplessly waving him off into the world from which she has at last completely withdrawn. Agatha has gone over to Rome. She is in the Wimbledon Convent. She lights candles there at the dim high altar of a God who in his compassion allows her to pray for the souls of her dear departed, Reggie and Priscilla, who died unshriven. Her gentleness has found a way. It is a pity that she did not find it sooner. However, she believes that the dreariness of the purgatory in which they wander is lightened by her love, and that they will at last join her in Heaven. It may be so. Who knows?

Peggy Sidlington wanted to have the boy. She argued that having three of her own she ought to know by now how to look after one, and she added that she had loved Priscilla,

his mother, but Crab said, "No, he is my son, and my son he shall be before the world. There's to be no shame and no hiding. He will know from the beginning that I am his father, and when he is old enough to understand I will explain everything. Priscilla would want this. My family shall protect him. If the Moones can't do this much, 'then what do they amount to? My people will agree."

They did—there was no discussion, no hesitancy. They accepted Priscilla's son. When Crab told them that he had registered the boy as John Reginald Cranbourne, son of Priscilla Birch and John Edward Cranbourne; Viscount Willing, they made no comment. Indeed there came a gleam in Tupper's eye and Vi lifted her chin haughtily and smiled. It was she who took the baby from Crab's arms at the font in the private chapel that is off the great hall at Jericho Sands. Only Crab and Tupper and Vi and I and the servants were at the christening. Every servant in the house and every man on the place had been summoned. It was Tupper's idea, his way of indicating what the position of this boy, male issue of his own line, was to be at Jericho Sands. Since then after long and solemn conference with Crab, he has made a settlement on Crab's son, a quite fantastic settlement, I find it. The place in Berkshire is his own, with its dozen farms, and half of all the family property that is not entailed is settled on him and his heirs for as long as the right of private property shall hold in England. Priscilla made no mistake in trusting Crab to look after her boy.

I was in my garden that morning in May when the telegram came. Spring was late that year. It had burst on us at last in a glory. The fields were all a splendour of green and gold. The lilacs were out. The apple trees frothed against a sky softly blue where little white clouds floated. Birds were nesting in our cottage eaves, swallows and thrushes and robins darted, hopped, flew up, flew down. The air was gay with their dipping wings, their busy twitterings. Never had England been so beautiful.

The telegram read—"Come at once and bring Lady Agatha. Priscilla wants you both." It was signed Crab and sent from London. I knew the nursing home where she was to be taken. I knew Agatha's address in the East End of London in some deaconess's house where she worked. I wired her to meet me at Waterloo and caught a train an hour later. If she weren't at the station I would have to go and find her and drag her by force, if necessary, to Priscilla's bedside, but she was there, gaunt and grey, in her long black clothes, standing like a black spectre on the station platform.

The nursing home was in Park Lane. It was the same one to which Crab had been taken when he was wounded. The spring pageant streamed by as we climbed the steps and waited at the door.

A white-capped nurse met us in the hall.

"Lady Agatha Brampton? Mr. Tweedle? Come up, please."

"The baby?" we breathed together.

"Born at midnight. A fine boy."

"My daughter?"

"You are just in time."

We climbed the stairs. A door opened. We entered. We did not at first see Priscilla in the white bed, in the white room. Her head was so low. There was no pillow under it and the foot of the bed was lifted a little. The bed slanted up. She lay on her back, her eyes closed.

Crab was kneeling by the bed, close to her, close to her head. His eyes were fixed on her still white face. He held one of her hands in his, clasped against him. He was leaning forward. He did not move his eyes from her face. He was as still as she. Only his tears moved. A sheet of water seemed to be pouring down his motionless face, but he did not blink or close his eyes.

The nurse bending over spoke to Priscilla. "They have come," she said.

Priscilla did not open her eyes or move her head.

"Mummy," she murmured, "so tired, too tired now, darling."

Her voice was deep and clear. It came true and uncannily strong from her still white lips. It was like a bell ringing from far away. I thought, "She cannot speak again," but after a moment she said my name.

"Tweedle, you've been a good friend." Then, "Show my son, mine and Crab's—so proud."

I think the nurse took up the baby then and held it out, I am not sure, my eyes were on Priscilla's face, that I should never see again.

The end came suddenly while we were still in the room. She frowned with closed eyes. Her throat contracted.

"Lift me, Crab."

Swiftly he lifted her up in his arms. Her head was on his shoulder now.

"Hold me, Crab, hold me close."

Her eyes opened wide. Terror was in them. "Tighter, Crab, I'm going. Don't let me go." Her eyes dilated unbearably. Then I saw the terror fade in them and saw her smile, a heavenly smile, her head back, her eyes turned to his face.

"No—not frightened," she said. "So happy with you, Crab—be happy too."

She seemed to have fallen asleep, so sweetly, so comfortably, she lay in his arms.

I know that she chose to die.

And Simon, to whom Agatha rendered a truthful account of Priscilla's death, writes in his journal:—

"God pity me. God have pity. Speak. Answer my question. Give me an assurance, a sign. I loved her. She was my wife, I loved her to the end. Crab Willing killed her, not I. It was he who lost her. I tried to save her. Surely I can't have been wrong? Speak, impenetrable Being, ghastly, gigantic Mute Who sit in judgment. Surely I was not mistaken? Surely I was right?"

She was an adulteress. For three years she lived in sin and her child was conceived and born in sin, and she therefore is damned. If that is not true, then it was I who murdered her, and everything is a lie, everything that I ever believed. You—You are a lie—— You—God, and I the victim of Your awful Joke.

“That is impossible, everything is impossible. I understand nothing, I lose track. I cannot trace—I cannot follow out—find any truth—anywhere.

“There remains a mystery—the mystery of her happy death. What, oh, my God, do you make of that?”

THE END

